The GIRLS of CENTRAL HIGH

Bert Heye.
Dec-25th-1933
From grandpa & grandma
Heye

THE KITE STRING WAS MANIPULATED SO AS TO BRING IT WITHIN THE MAN'S REACH.

The Girls of Central High. —*Page* 92.

The Girls of Central High

OR

RIVALS FOR ALL HONORS

BY

GERTRUDE W. MORRISON

AUTHOR OF THE GIRLS OF CENTRAL HIGH ON LAKE LUNA, THE GIRLS OF CENTRAL HIGH AT BASKETBALL, ETC.

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THE GIRLS OF CENTRAL HIGH

CHAPTER I

A BLOW AT THE HIGH COST OF LIVING

"HEY, Laura!"

The side window of James Belding's jewelry store was open behind the grillwork of strong steel bars. Laura had just finished dusting the inside of the last show case in the row on that side of the wide shop, and had replaced the trays. This was Laura Belding's usual Saturday morning task; her father would not trust Chet to do it, although the lad often waited on customers.

Just now Mr. Belding was at the front of the store, showing a tray of his most valuable rings to a customer. The shopper was a stranger to both the jeweler and his daughter, who were alone in the place; therefore Mr. Belding's eyes did not leave the tray before him.

"Hey, Laura!"

The call was repeated in a loud "stage whisper"; the sound came from the open window.

Laura started and turned to look. She could see a fly-away mop of flaxen hair, a line of forehead, and two sparkling brown eyes.

"Bobby Hargrew!" she cried, and went to the window.

"Oh, Laura! I want something," whispered her friend, fairly dancing up and down outside the window. "I've got *such* a scheme!"

"What is it now?" asked Laura, sedately. "Bobby" Hargrew's schemes were often very crack-brained indeed. Everybody—except her grandmother—called her "Bobby" instead of "Clara." There were no boys in the Hargrew family; but her father, Tom Hargrew, declared that Clara was just as much fun as any boy. And she certainly was a "flyaway."

"Get your father to let you have that big magnifying glass we were looking at last week, and bring it along to the store," whispered Bobby, chuckling while she preferred the request.

"What for?"

"Never mind! I'll show you when we get to the store. Dad's about to shut up. Hurry, now!"

Tom Hargrew's grocery store was on the block just beyond the Belding shop.

"I—don't—know," murmured Laura, glancing at her father and his customer. "Pa's busy."

"Oh, come on!" cried the harum-scarum Bobby. "I won't hurt the old glass."

Thus adjured, Laura put on her hat and walked slowly to the front of the store with the magnifying glass in her hand.

"Father," she said softly, touching his arm, "I want to borrow this for a little while. I will bring it back."

He nodded. He could not leave his customer then. So Laura walked out of the store and joined her school friend in Market Street. The girls were sophomores in Central High School of the city and they had always lived in adjoining streets, so were very good friends. Bobby was so full of mischief that it was hard to keep her out of trouble; but sometimes the more quiet daughter of the jeweler had a restraining influence over the younger girl.

"Oh, I've got the greatest scheme!" gasped Bobby, choked with laughter. "Hurry up before Daddy closes."

"What have you been doing now?" asked her friend, admonishingly.

"Just dressing one of the store windows—honest to goodness! that's all I've been doing."

"But why the magnifying glass?"

"That's it. You'll see the joke. Hurry," urged Bobby, pulling Laura along the walk.

They came to Mr. Hargrew's grocery store

and Bobby halted her friend before the first window. It was tastefully arranged with canned goods and package products; but in the center, in a bed of different colored tissue paper, was an ordinary loaf of bread of small size. Above it was a freshly lettered card bearing the legend:

Why Worry About
THE HIGH COST OF LIVING?

ONLY 5 CENTS

"But I don't see the joke," murmured Laura, turning to her giggling friend, curiously.

"Wait!" cried Bobby. "You'll see. Give me that glass."

She snatched the magnifying glass from her friend's hand and whisked into the store. In a moment she had set the glass in such a way before the loaf of bread that anybody passing the window must look at the bread through it—and the loaf certainly looked to be a huge one for the stated price on the card above.

Laura had to laugh. And she knew it would make many other people laugh before Monday morning. Such little jokes attracted trade, too, and Bobby Hargrew was full of novel ideas. Her father came outside and viewed the advertising display admiringly.

"Hasn't that young one got a great head?" he said. Bobby's capers usually "tickled" her father. Having no son, he made her his companion as though she were a boy.

Already pedestrians had begun to stop before the window and laugh over the joke. Laura turned to go back to her father's store.

"You're coming up to the school this afternoon, Bobby?" she asked.

"I don't know," returned her friend, slowly. "I wanted to see the East High boys beat the West High boys. First baseball game of the season, you know; I just hope Central will win the pennant."

"So do I," murmured Laura. "But I think we girls should have some interest in athletics besides our loyalty to the boys' baseball and football teams. I want the girls of Central High to organize for our own improvement and pleasure. Don't you?"

"Do you suppose anything will come of the meeting this afternoon?" queried Bobby, doubtfully. "Old 'Gee Gee' is opposed to it."

"How do you know Miss Carrington doesn't like the idea?" asked Laura, quickly.

"She told us if we did not stand well in deportment, as well as in our studies, we could not belong to the new association—if it was formed."

"Well, why should we? We've got to play

the game, Bobby. It's only honest in us to do our work well if we want the fun of playing basketball, and learning to dance, and row, and swim, and all the rest of it."

"Well, it's little fun I'll get out of it," sighed Bobby. "Gee Gee is forever putting black tally-marks down against me."

"Miss Grace G. Carrington, whom you so impolitely term 'Gee Gee,'" laughed Laura, "is thoroughly familiar with you, Miss Bobby Hargrew. You cannot fool her for one little minute —that's why you don't like her."

The grocer's daughter flushed; but she laughed, too.

"Perhaps you're right," she admitted. "She always *does* catch me at things."

"Then don't do 'things,'" advised Laura Belding, with a smile.

"Can't all be 'Miss Prims,' like you, Laura," cried Bobby saucily.

"You'll come to the meeting, just the same?" urged her friend.

"Oh, yes; I'll come. I hope we'll get a girls' athletic association formed, too. The boys won't let us play with them if we want to, and I'd like to learn how to play some game beside Puss in the Corner and Drop the Handkerchief. We're all getting so dreadfully lady-like and grown up.

I *hate* to grow up. If I've got to be all stiff and starched all the time, I'd rather be a boy. Why! Nellie Agnew looks so much like her mother, back to, when she's dressed up, that last Sunday I asked after her rheumatism in my best-bred voice before I saw 'twas Nell!" and again Bobby broke into one of her jolly laughs.

"You come to the meeting. Mr. Sharp approves, and maybe he'll be there; so will Mrs. Case, our gymnastic teacher."

"I'll come, Laura," promised the harum-scarum, as the jeweler's daughter went on to her father's shop. The customer had gone when she arrived and Mr. Belding was putting up the grating at the door. The more valuable articles of the stock had been put into the huge safe at the back of the room, and the safe locked.

"We'll go to Mostyn's to lunch in a minute, Laura," said her father. "Your dusting is done, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," replied Laura, smiling.

It was a regular Saturday treat to accompany her father to the fashionable restaurant for luncheon. Laura did not begrudge the time she spent helping in the store during that forenoon, when the treat followed.

Most of the stores on Market Street closed for the Saturday half holiday, even if, like Mr. Beld-

ing's jewelry store, they opened again for the evening trade. For the town was interested in athletics, and Saturday afternoon in pleasant weather the year around was given up to field sports of some kind.

Centerport was advantageously located for both land and water sports, being situated on the level shore of a beautiful lake, many miles in extent, with a range of low hills behind it to shelter the city from the north.

The boys of the three High Schools of the city—East, West and Central—were rivals in baseball, football, rowing, and track athletics; and on this particular Saturday the first baseball game of the season was to be played between East and West High School nines. Central High, which Laura Belding and Bobby Hargrew attended, had a good team, too, and the girls—loyal to their boy friends—would have "rooted" for the home team had the Central club been playing.

However, the girls of Central High—especially the Sophomores and Juniors—had a particular reason for attending no baseball game on this afternoon. As soon as her luncheon was finished, Laura excused herself and hurried away from Mostyn's restaurant toward the schoolhouse.

Her route lay past Mr. Hargrew's grocery—one window of which was the scene of Bobby Hargrew's latest practical joke. The sun was very hot for so early in the year, and the grocery was on the sunny side of the street. It was long enough past noon for the sun's rays to pour into the wide window.

Just before Laura reached Mr. Hargrew's store she saw a tow-headed boy, with a baseball cap stuck on the very back of his head, coming whistling along the hot walk with his hands in his pockets.

"Billy Long might just as well not have any hat on at all," thought Laura, smiling as she beheld the freckled, good-natured face of the towhead.

And then, quite suddenly, Billy Long's actions amazed Laura Belding.

He halted, as though struck motionless by the sight of Bobby's joke in the store window. Then he leaped to the window, leaped back, turned to look up and down the almost deserted street (there was nobody in sight but Laura for two or three blocks) and then dashed toward the corner which the girl had but a few seconds before passed.

"What's the matter with you, Billy Long?" cried Laura.

"Fire!" bawled the boy. "Mr. Hargrew's store's afire! Fire!"

"Nonsense!" cried Laura, and ran forward. "Are you fooling me, Short and Long?"

But in a moment she saw smoke rising from the very middle of the show window—in the heart of the bed of tissue paper.

CHAPTER II

ATHLETICS—PRO AND CON

Billy Long (called "Short and Long" because of his diminutive stature) galloped on to the street corner, shouting "Fire! Fire!" in an astonishingly weak voice. Billy was so excited that it choked him!

On the corner was one of the city fire-alarm boxes. There was no place of deposit of the key indicated upon the box; but it had a glass front. Billy looked wildly about for a stick, or stone, with which to break the glass. There appeared to be nothing of the kind at hand.

Down the side street, not half a block away, was the fire station; but that fact never crossed Master Billy's mind. Besides, the importance of having a legitimate reason for sending in an alarm was the prominent idea in Short and Long's mind at that moment.

He glanced back once and saw the spiral of smoke rising behind the broad plate glass window of the grocery store. Laura Belding stood

before it unable, as he had been for the moment when he first sighted it, to do a thing. Indeed, what was there to do but turn in the alarm for the department?

The loaf of bread nestling in its bed of tissue paper was already burned to a cinder; the paper would soon be in flames.

Billy hesitated only a moment when he reached the box and found no weapon with which to break the glass. He pulled out his handkerchief, wrapped it about his knuckles, and splintered the glass with one blow. At that he cut his hand a little; but he scarcely noticed this in his eagerness.

Standing on his tiptoes he was just able to pull down the hook inside. He could hear the alarm bell sound in the station half a block away at almost the instant he set the telegraph to working.

By this time several citizens had run to the store front. They were all quite as excited as Billy Long, the short boy.

"Tom's locked up and gone!" cried one, shaking the latch of the store door.

"Of course he has—gone to the ball game!" said another.

"This door'll have to be smashed in."

"No! break the window pane!"

"Lock will cost less than the glass," cried another man.

"That burning glass is what did it," said one more reflective man. "Fool trick—that was."

"That young one of his did it," declared the first speaker. "Always up to some trick or other."

"Say! where's the fire department? They must have all gone to the ball game, too."

"I'm going to break the glass in this door!" shouted the first man to arrive.

"What good will that do?" cried his friend, mopping his brow. "There's the wire screen behind it. You can't bust *that* with your fist."

"Break the big window, then!"

"No! Smash the lock of the door."

But they had no tools with which to do this. Had there been a loose paving block in the street the urgent man would surely have burst in the big plate glass. Just then a man with a helmet on his head and an axe in his hand rushed around the corner—the first fireman on the scene.

"Where is it, boy?" he demanded of Billy Long. "You rang in the alarm, didn't you?"

"Here it is, Ned!" yelled one of the men in front of the grocery store. "You've got to break down this door to git to it."

"You got to break the window—that's quickest!" declared the insistent man.

The fireman ran to the door. He poised his axe for a blow as the others stood back. But suddenly Laura Belding halted the whole proceedings.

"Wait! wait a moment!" she cried, darting to the side of the window.

The fireman looked over his shoulder at her. The girl, with nimble fingers, released the awning ropes. In half a minute the heavy awning dropped over the walk and shut out the hot rays of the sun. The cinder of bread stopped smoking. *The fire was out!*

"Well! don't that beat all?" cackled one of the men.

The fireman grinned sheepishly and walked to the middle of the show-window to make sure that the danger was really over.

"You've got a head on you—that's what you've got!" he said to Laura.

"She's Belding's daughter—a smart little girl," declared another of the men.

The engine and hose carriage came tearing around the corner just then. From up the street thundered the ladder-truck, three huge horses abreast. A crowd came running to the scene.

Laura slipped away, and found Short and Long at her side.

"Huh!" he said, with a grimace. "I thought I was going to be a hero. You've got me beat, Laura. You stole my laurel wreath right off my head!"

"You ought to have used what's in your head a little better, Billy," returned the girl, laughing. "What is your gray matter for?—as Professor Dimple would say."

"Huh! Old Dimple! That's exactly what he would say. He certainly does stick the gaff into us," grumbled the short boy. "I've got a page of Virgil extra to translate between now and Monday morning. He's a mean old hunks."

"Such language!" sighed Laura. "I should think you needed extra work in English, not Latin, Billy."

"I don't need extra work at all," proclaimed Master Billy, with scorn. "I've got too much work as it is. And he and Mr. Sharp between them threaten to cut me out of the ball team altogether this season if I don't catch up. And what's the team going to do for a short stop?"

"Well, Miss Carrington tells us girls that if we are going in for athletics we have all got to have good marks, too. Only the girls who stand high can join the new athletic association.

Some of the lazy girls will be disappointed, I fear."

"Are you girls really going in for athletics?" demanded Billy.

"We are. Why shouldn't we? It isn't fair for you boys to have all the fun."

"And they say they are going to start girls' branches in East and West High, too?"

"Yes. We want to have inter-school matches. Inter-class matches are forbidden right at the start. The doctor says there must be no rivalry among classes."

"Yah! but there will be," said Billy. "There always is. Purt Sweet pretty near broke up the ball team this season because he couldn't play."

"Now we girls will show you how much nicer we can conduct affairs," laughed Laura. "We sha'n't squabble."

"Oh, no!" scoffed Billy. "What do you s'pose Hessie Grimes will do if she isn't allowed to boss everything? Didn't she and that chum of hers, Lil Pendleton, break up the class supper last year—when we were freshmen? Oh, no!"

"Well, that won't happen again," said Laura firmly.

"Why not?"

"Because the rest of us girls will not agree to follow her," declared Laura, confidently.

"You know she won't play if she can't be 'it,'" grinned Billy.

"Now you see," returned Laura, good naturedly, and a moment later she parted from the short boy.

She had not walked another block toward the schoolhouse when she heard a voice calling her name:

"Laura! Laura Belding!"

"Why, Jess!" exclaimed Laura, eagerly. "I was afraid you wouldn't come."

Josephine, or "Jess," Morse was a taller girl that her friend, with bright gray eyes, and hair of that "fly-away" variety that never *will* look smooth. Despite Miss Morse's bright eyes she often did the most ridiculous things quite thoughtlessly. Her mind was of the "wandering" variety. And almost always one could find an ink stain on her finger. This marked her among her girl friends, at least, as being "literary." And, as the old folk say, "she came by it naturally." Her mother, Mrs. Mary Morse, had some little reputation as a writer for the magazines.

"Yes," said Miss Morse, putting her arm around her chum's waist as they walked on together. "I just *had* to come. If you are going in for athletics, Laura, of course I've got to."

"Too bad," laughed her friend. "You're just whipped into it, I suppose?"

"I just am."

"Why, it will be fun, Jess!"

"Who says so? I'd lots rather go to the theater—or to a party—or even go shopping. And you can't dress up and play those horrid games the gym. teacher tells about."

"But you like to play tennis."

"Er—well—— Yes, I play tennis. I like it because there aren't many of the girls—nor the boys, either—who can beat me at that. I've got such a long reach, you see," said the tall girl, with satisfaction.

"Then you'd like any athletic game in which you could excel?"

"Why—I suppose so," admitted Miss Morse.

"That's a poor attitude in which to approach school athletics," said Laura with a sigh.

"Why is it?"

"Because, as I understand it, we should play for the sport's sake, not so much to win every time. That's the way to play the game. And that is what Mrs. Case will tell us to-day, I know."

"She will be at the meeting, I suppose?"

"And Miss Carrington."

"Oh—Gee Gee! Of course. To keep us up

in our deportment," said Jess, making a face.

"You all find her so strict," observed Laura, seriously. "She treats me nicely."

"Why, you know very well, Laura, that you never in your life did anything to get a teacher mad."

"I don't know what you mean by that. We don't go to school to play tricks on the teachers. I want them to respect me. And father and mother would be disappointed if I brought home a bad report, especially in deportment."

"Oh, I know!" said Jess. "For a girl who likes fun as you do, you do manage to keep concealed all your superabundance of spirits—in school, at least. But some of us have just *got* to slop over."

"'Slop over!'"

"Yes, Miss Nancy. Don't be a prude in your English, too," laughed Jess. "Say! did you hear how Bobby got Gee Gee going yesterday in chemistry class?"

Laura shook her head, seeing that it would be useless to take her chum to task further on the topic of slang.

"Why, Gee Gee had been expatiating at great length on the impossibility of really creating, or annihilating anything—the indestructibility of matter, you know."

"I see," said Laura, nodding.

"Oh, she brought up the illustrations in ranks and platoons, and regiments. I guess she thought she had got the fact hammered home at last, for she said: 'You absolutely cannot make *anything.*' And then Bobby speaks up, just as innocent, and says: 'But, Miss Carrington, can't we make a noise that didn't exist before?'

"And what do you think?" cried Jess, giggling, "Poor Bobby got a black mark for it. Gee Gee said she did it to make the class laugh."

"And Bobby did, didn't she?" said Laura, but laughing, too.

"Oh, we laughed all right. But the lesson was practically over. Gee Gee ought to be glad if we can leave her class room in anything but a flood of tears!" completed Jess, as they came to Central High School.

CHAPTER III

A REAL ALARM

A bevy of girls were lingering on the steps and in the portico of the High School building. Mr. Sharp had given permission for the girls interested in the formation of the athletic association to meet in the small hall—"the music room" it was called,—on the third floor of the building, next to the suite given up to the teachers' offices and studies.

Laura and her dearest friend, Josephine Morse, were welcomed vociferously by many of the waiting girls. Among them was Bobby Hargrew, but Laura did not tell her of the result of her practical joke in the window of the grocery store. Indeed, there was no opportunity to speak privately to Miss Harum-scarum. She came running to meet the chums just as Dora and Dorothy Lockwood, who were twins, crossed their path, arm in arm.

"There!" cried Jess Morse, "which of you two girls did I lend my pencil to yesterday in

chemistry class? I declare I meant to mark the one I lent it to somehow; but you were dressed just alike then, and you're dressed just alike now. How do you ever tell each other apart?" she added, shaking both twins by their arms.

"Only one way there'll ever be to tell 'em apart," broke in Bobby Hargrew. "When they get good and old, mebbe one will lose her teeth before the other does—like the twins back in the town my father lived in."

"How was that, Bobby?" asked Jess.

"Why, those two twins, Sam and Bill, were just like Dora and Dorothy. Their own fathers and mothers didn't know them apart. But Bill lost all his upper teeth and wouldn't buy store teeth. So folks that knew got to telling them apart.. You see, if you put your finger in Bill's mouth and he bit you, why 'twas Sam!"

A rather tall, stately looking girl—taller, even than Jess Morse—drew near the group while the girls were laughing over Bobby's story.

"Oh, Nellie!" cried Laura. "I'm glad to see you here. What does the doctor say about the scheme of our forming an athletic association?"

"I don't know what he thinks about the proposed association," returned the physician's daughter; "but I'm sure he aproves of athletics for girls. He told mother only yesterday that I

ought to do at least half the sweeping, and so relieve mother and the maid," and Nellie Agnew laughed. "What do you think of that? Father says I am getting round shouldered and flat chested. I do hope we'll go in for athletics. I don't like housework."

"Lazy girl!" said Laura. "That is the way it will be with lots of them—I know. If it is play, they'll like it; but anything like real work——"

"There goes Laura Belding again—telling us all how we should be good and proper," said a sneering voice behind Laura. "Really, I should think you'd be tired of telling us all how to conduct ourselves. You ought to run a 'Heart to Heart Talks' department in the *Evening Awful.*"

"Hessie Grimes! Mean thing!" hissed Jess in Laura's ear. But the latter turned an unruffled countenance upon the rather over-dressed, red-faced girl whose strident voice had broken in upon the good-natured conversation of the group.

"Oh, no, Hester. I don't think my forte is journalism. We'll let Jess take that position," Laura said. "I see you and Lily Pendleton are both here, so there is nobody else to wait for. We can go upstairs, I guess."

"Oh, I don't know as I want to join the silly

old society," giggled Lily, who was a slender, white faced girl, who always clung to Hester and instead of giving the more assertive girl the benefit of her support, "clung like the ivy to the oak-tree's branch."

"Lil and Hessie expect to be 'touched' for the M. O. R.'s," said Jess, quickly.

"Huh!" exclaimed Bobby Hargrew. "Perhaps they've another guess coming. The Middle of the Road Girls are not taking in many Sophs —we can make up our minds to that."

"And do Hessie and Lily wish to join such a solemn conclave as the Mothers of the Republic," demanded Nell Agnew, laughing, and making another play upon the initials of the most popular society of Central High. "I wouldn't believe it."

"You don't know whether I wish to join or not, Miss!" snapped Hester Grimes.

"Say!" cried Bobby. "Heard the latest? Know what Chet and Lance and Short and Long call the M. O. R. girls?"

"What is it?" asked the twins, in chorus.

"The Mary O'Rourkes! And Mary O'Rourke *is* a member—she's a senior, you know, and just the nicest girl! But her initials are the same as the society's—and nobody knows what the initials stand for. That is, nobody outside the society."

There had begun a general advance into the school building and up the broad stairway, ere this. Chattering and laughing, in little groups and by couples, the girls mounted the two flights and advanced slowly into the hall, or into the main office next to it. The windows of this office were over the front entrance of the building, and although the room was a very long one, it was brilliantly lighted, the windows reaching almost from ceiling to floor.

A large globe of water with goldfish and some aquatic plants and coral in it had the post of honor on a stand in the center of the bowed windows. Before the window was Principal Franklin Sharp's great table-desk, and a big rubbish basket beside it. The janitor had not yet dusted and cleaned these rooms for the week, knowing that the girls were to hold their meeting there.

"Mrs. Case and Gee Gee are here already, girls," whispered Bobby Hargrew, after peering in somewhat cautiously at the door of the music room.

Laura and her chum, with the doctor's daughter and some of the older girls, approached the hall where the meeting was to be held. There were already fifty or more girls gathered in the music room and as many more were strolling through the corridors, or in the office.

Suddenly a burst of half-stifled laughter arose from the office. A crowd of the more mischievous girls were about Bobby Hargrew. Miss Carrington stepped down from the platform at the end of the music room and marched steadily toward the office.

"Oh! Bobby's going to catch it again!" whispered Jess in Laura's ear.

But there was no opportunity for her friends to warn the sprightly Clara of the approach of her nemesis. And when Miss Carrington, otherwise Gee Gee, came to the doorway and through her eye-glasses beheld the heinous offense of Bobby the teacher was, indeed, very much horrified.

Bobby was perched on the corner of Mr. Sharp's desk, in a most unladylike attitude, and apparently just removing a burning cigarette from her rosy lips! The blue smoke curled away from the horrid thing, and Bobby was leaning back, with her roguish glance following the smoke-rings, and apparently enjoying the weed immensely.

"Miss Hargrew!"

The awful voice startled everybody but Bobby herself. Perhaps the wicked one had been expecting it.

"What do I see, Miss Hargrew?" demanded Gee Gee, in a tone of cold horror.

"I really do not know, Miss Carrington," replied Bobby, as the girls shrank away from her vicinity, and she herself hopped down to the floor, hiding her hands behind her. "I never did know just how far you could see with your glasses."

"Miss Hargrew, come here!" snapped the teacher, in no mood for frivolity.

Bobby approached slowly. She held her hands behind her back like a naughty child.

"Let me see what is in your hand, Miss!" commanded the teacher

Bobby brought forth her right hand—empty.

"Your other hand, Miss!"

Back snapped the culprit's right hand and then her left hand appeared—likewise empty.

"Miss Hargrew! I demand that you give me what you are hiding in your hand, at once!" cried Miss Carrington.

Slowly, and with drooping mien, the culprit brought forth both hands. In the fingers of one still smoked the brown object the teacher had spied.

"A vile cigarette!" she gasped.

"No, ma'am," replied Bobby, quite bravely. "Only a piece of Chinese punk-stick left over from last year's Fourth of July celebration. I wouldn't smoke a cigarette, Miss Carrington. I don't think they're nice—do *you?*"

It was impossible for the other girls to smother their laughter. A ripple of merriment spread back to the music room Now, Miss Carrington was a very unfortunate woman. She had no sense of humor. There should be a civil service examination for educational instructors in the line of "sense of humor." For those who could not "pass" would never make really successful teachers.

"Clara Hargrew!" snapped Miss Carrington, her glasses almost emitting sparks. "You will show me a five hundred word essay upon the topic "Respect to Our Superiors" when you come to the classes, Monday morning. And you may go home now. Until your standing in deportment is higher, you can have no part in athletics, save those gymnastic exercises catalogued already in the school's curriculum. After-school athletics are forbidden you, Miss Hargrew."

Bobby at first paled, and then grew very red. Tears stood in her usually sparkling eyes.

"Oh, Miss Carrington!" she cried. "I was only in fun. And—and this is not a regular school session This is Saturday."

"You are in the precincts of the school, Miss." said Gee Gee. "Do as you are bid. And throw that nasty thing away."

She swept back to the platform at the upper end of the music room, and those girls who had

not already gone ahead of her were quick to leave the culprit to herself. Hester Grimes smiled sneeringly at poor little Bobby.

"Got taken up that time pretty short, didn't you, Miss Smarty?" she jeered.

Miss Grimes had often been the butt of Bobby Hargrew's jokes. And then—Bobby was Laura Belding's friend and eager supporter. The door was closed between the music room and the office and Bobby was left alone.

Mrs. Case, the girls' athletic instructor, was a very different person from the hated Gee Gee. She was a fresh-colored, breezy woman, in her thirties, whose clear voice and frank manner the girls all liked. And then, in the present instance, her proposals anent the athletic association fitted right into the desires and interests of most of the pupils present.

"The work of the Girls' Branch Athletic Association is spreading fast," Mrs. Case said. "Centerport must not be behind in any good thing for the education and development of either her boys or girls. This is something that I have been advocating before the Board for several years. And other teachers are interested, too.

"An association will be formed among the girls of East High and West High, as well. I understand that the school authorities of both

Lumberport and Keyport are to take up the subject of girls' athletics, too. So, although inter-class athletics is tabooed, there will be plenty of rivalry between the girls of Central High and those of our East and West schools, and those of neighboring cities. A certain amount of rivalry is a good thing; yet we must remember to cheer the losers and winners both. This is true sport.

"I want my girls," continued Miss Case, with a smile, "to be all-round athletes, as well as all-round scholars. You may be rivals for all honors with those of your own age in other schools. There are most fascinating games and exercises to take up, as well as Folk Dancing. The boys have a splendid association in our school——"

Suddenly Miss Carrington sprang up, interrupting her fellow-teacher. She stood upon the platform a moment, looking toward the office, and sniffed the air like a hound on the scent.

"Wait!" she commanded. "I smell smoke!"

She was a tall woman, and she darted down the room with long strides. She flung open the office door. Then she shrieked and fell back, and half the girls in the music room echoed her cry.

Flames rose half way to the ceiling, right near the principal's desk, and the office itself was full of smoke!

CHAPTER IV

"POOR BOBBY!"

ORDINARILY the girls of Central High were perfect in "fire drill." But then, when ever they practiced that manœuver, there was no fire. For a hundred or more of them, however, to see the shooting flames and blinding smoke, and to hear a teacher who had "lost her head" screaming as loud as she could scream, was likely to create some confusion.

It was Mrs. Case who rang the fire alarm. This notified the janitor, if he was in his basement quarters, of the situation of the fire, too. He would come with an extinguisher to their rescue. But meanwhile the blaze in the principal's office was increasing.

"That reckless girl!" shrieked Miss Carrington. "She shall pay for this!"

And Laura, who had run down the room until she, too, was at the door of the office, knew whom the teacher meant. Poor Bobby Hargrew! She and her piece of burning punk-stick

must be at the bottom of the catastrophe. But Miss Carrington really spoke as though she thought Bobby had intentionally set the fire.

"Oh, she never could have meant to do it," cried Laura, horrified.

The girls had run from the door into the corridor and nobody but Miss Carrington and Laura were at the office door.

"What shall we do? What shall we do?" moaned the teacher, wringing her hands.

"Can't we put it out?" demanded the girl.

"No, no! You'll be burned! Come back!" cried Miss Carrington.

But the smoke had cleared somewhat now and Laura could see just what damage the fire was doing. It surely had started in the big waste-basket. If Bobby had flung the burning punk into that basket she deserved punishment—that was sure. Now the flames were spreading to the rug on which the basket stood. And they were charring the corner of the desk. Laura could smell the scorching varnish.

"Come back, Miss Belding!" commanded the teacher again.

But the girl thought she saw a chance to accomplish something. There was no use in waiting for the janitor to come to put out the flames if they could be quenched immediately. And

no knowing how long before John would reach the room. He was not very spry.

Besides, to allow the fire to spread was both reckless and foolish. Laura saw just what should be done. She sprang into the room and passed the flames in a single swift dash.

She reached the window and seized the heavy bowl of water in which the gold fish swam. It was some weight for her, but she seized it firmly with both arms, and staggered toward the burning basket.

The smoke was drawn away for a moment by the draught of an opening door and she heard Miss Carrington scream again. But Laura shut both her eyes tight and staggered on.

Her foot tripped on the edge of the rug, she felt the blast of fire in her face, and then she overturned the full globe, fish and all, upon the flames!

With a great hiss of steam, which rose in her face in a cloud, the water struck the burning basket and the rug. There was enough water to saturate the place where the fire had been burning the most briskly. Not every spark was put out with this dash of water; but it took but a minute to stamp out the remainder when the steam cleared away.

But the poor fish! All four lay dead upon the

floor, either trampled upon, or scorched by the flames.

"You are a very strong young girl, Miss Belding," said Mrs. Case, hurrying in. "And a quick witted one."

Laura was thinking that it was the second fire she had put out that day!

Miss Carrington was still sputtering. She called Laura "a dear, good girl—so bright and quick-witted!" And on the other hand she scolded about Bobby Hargrew until one would have thought poor Bobby was a monster of wickedness.

"Never mind the poor fish, Miss Agnew," cried the teacher, as the doctor's tender hearted daughter expressed her sorrow over the fate of those pretty creatures. "More fish can be bought—plenty more. And here is the rug ruined—and Mr. Sharp's desk injured. But it shall be paid for—yes, indeed! Clara Hargrew's father shall settle the bill. And Miss Clara shall pay for it, too. Careless, reckless girl!"

"Oh, but Miss Carrington!" cried Laura. "Perhaps she didn't do it."

"Who could have done it, then?" demanded Gee Gee, almost tempted to be angry with Laura for trying to defend the culprit.

"But nobody saw her——"

"I do not say she deliberately set the fire," said Miss Carrington, angrily. "But she had the lighted punk. Naturally she tossed it thoughtlessly into the basket. Behold the result!" finished Gee Gee, so dramatically that her glasses hopped off her nose.

"Oh, I can't believe Bobby would have done so careless a thing," murmured Laura in the ear of her chum, Jess Morse, who appeared at this juncture.

"But who else could be guilty?" demanded Jess, convinced against her own will.

"It will just about finish Bobby for this half," groaned Laura.

"I should say it would!" returned Jess, as Mrs. Case called them back to their seats, while old John, who had now arrived, remained to clean up the debris.

The excitement had come very near breaking up the meeting. And it was some time before the athletic instructor could obtain the undivided attention of the girls.

The meeting was advanced far enough for a committee to be appointed to report on constitution, by-laws, and the like, and the government of the new organization. It was the intention of those backing the organization that the

girls of Central High should govern their athletics as much as possible themselves. Too much interference by the faculty always spoils a school society.

Laura Belding and her chum were both appointed on this committee; and Hester Grimes and her friend Lily were likewise members. The committee was to report in a week, and Mrs. Case was to meet with them and advise them.

Miss Carrington burst out in her tirade upon the absent Clara Hargrew just as soon as the meeting was closed. She said to Mrs. Case:

"One of my pupils you cannot have in your association, Mrs. Case! I shall veto Miss Hargrew's entering into any sports, or taking any "extras," during the remainder of this term. And I shall take up the matter with the principal, too. I am not at all convinced in my mind that for such an offense a girl of her age should not be suspended."

"Why, don't you suppose it was entirely an accident, Miss Carrington?" asked the athletic instructor, doubtfully.

"I don't know whether it could be called wholly an accident. I shall look into it very closely," said the other teacher, shaking her head and biting her lips.

"Poor Bobby!" repeated Laura Belding to

her chum, as they went out of the school building. "She is so enthusiastic over games and athletics, too. It will be dreadful deprivation for her."

"Do you suppose she really threw that burning punk into the papers?" asked Jess.

"Why—I suppose so. Of course, she'll be given a chance to say whether she did or not. But how else could the fire have started?"

But Miss Morse had no answer to make to that.

CHAPTER V

WHOM DO YOU BELIEVE?

THE Beldings lived in a nice house on Whiffle Street, with quite a big plot of ground about it —room for a lawn in front, a tennis court at the side, and a garden in the rear, out of which a rustic gate opened into the street where the Hargrews lived. Mr. Belding owned the house and, with his business as jeweler, was considered, as fortunes went in Centerport, a wealthy man. But the family lived with old-fashioned simplicity.

Mrs. Belding was, Laura knew, just the dearest mother who ever lived; yet she had been brought up as a girl in a country community, had never had interests any broader than her own home while her children were small, and now that Laura and Chetwood were almost "grown up"—or, at least, *felt* they were—Mother Belding scarcely understood their plans and aspirations. The new organization was "too much" for her, as she frequently said.

"Why, how ridiculous!" Mrs. Belding once said, upon coming home from a shopping tour. "They show me exactly the same style of garment both for Laura and myself. No difference save the size, I declare! And at Laura's age I had not even begun to put my hair up, and my skirts had not been lengthened."

"Changes—changes! Don't let them worry you, Mother," said her husband, comfortably.

"Well, Milly and Frank are left us, anyway—they're still children," sighed the troubled lady. "But I must admit that Laura and Chet are too much for me!"

Not that either of her older children gave her real cause for worriment or complaint. Chet was his father's chum and confidant; he could not go far wrong under such guidance. And Laura was a very sweet tempered and practical girl. Indeed, it was Laura's shrewd outlook upon and her keen appreciation of things that had never entered her mother's mind as a girl, that so startled Mrs. Belding.

At supper that night Chet was full of the ball game that his father and he had attended that afternoon.

"Well, the East High fellows beat the West High boys, just as everybody said they would. They've got the battery—Hanks and Doolittle—

and Merryweather and Ted Doyle are some punkins with the stick. Why, Ted is a bear-cat! But I believe we Central High fellows can put up a game that will hold them for a while. I want to see Central High win the pennant this year."

"What is a battery?" sighed his mother. "Why 'punkins' and 'stick'? Is this Ted you speak of really a subject for side-show exhibition, or are you 'nature-faking' when you call him a 'bear-cat'? And why should the playing of you and your friends at base-ball, Chetwood, 'hold them' for any length of time? Please elucidate?"

Laura and the younger children burst out laughing, and the older daughter said:

"English *is* a funny language, isn't it?"

"The American brand of it is," said Mr. Belding, who was also smiling.

"That is not English," remarked the mother, with scorn. "Such expressions have no relation to good English. But I grant you that the slang language is very funny, indeed."

"Aw, mother, the trouble with you is you don't understand athletics. Every game has its own technical phrases, so to speak. You ask Laura to explain. I hear Central High girls are going in for 'em. Going to compete for all honors with the other schools, eh, Laura?"

"We hope to," returned his sister.

"How did the meeting go, daughter?" asked Mr. Belding, with interest.

Laura recited the work accomplished. "Of course," she said, "we shall found our association on the constitution of the Girls' Branch Athletic Association. Then we can compete for trophies with inter-county and inter-state teams, as well as with the local teams. Mrs. Case says that there will be an association at both Lumberport and Keyport."

"Do you approve of all this disturbance about girls' athletics, James?" asked Mrs. Belding.

"It's for after-hours. It won't interfere with their school work. It can't, in fact," said the jeweler, "for only those pupils who stand well in both their studies and in deportment can take part."

"And poor Bobby!" cried Laura, suddenly. "It does seem as though she was fated to have bad luck. She won't be able to join, even if Miss Carrington has her way," and she told the family about the fire in the principal's office.

"A very careless girl," said Mrs. Belding, yet not sternly, for she loved jolly, harum-scarum Bobby Hargrew.

"You were a brave kid, Laura, to think of the water bowl," said Chet, with enthusiasm.

"I object, Chetwood!" exclaimed his mother.

"Neither your father nor I are caprine, hollow-horned ruminants. Your sister, therefore, cannot be a 'kid.'"

"Oh, Mother!" complained Chet. "You won't let a fellow talk."

"I would much prefer to hear a young gentleman converse," returned Mrs. Belding, though smiling. "And I agree with you that our Laura is both brave and quick-witted."

"She'll get along in the world," said Mr. Belding, with a satisfied smile. "But I'm sorry Tom Hargrew's girl is in trouble."

"Of course, I haven't seen her since Miss Carrington sent her home," Laura said. "Nobody has heard her side of the story."

"Of course, she set the papers afire," Chet observed.

"It seems impossible that it could be otherwise. Thoughtless child!" said their mother.

"But I want to wait and hear Bobby's story. If she says she didn't, and *knows* she didn't, I shall believe her," spoke Laura.

"You will not take circumstantial evidence into consideration, then?" laughed her father.

"Not against Bobby's word," returned Laura, confidently. "Bobby just couldn't tell a falsehood. It isn't in her. That is why she so often gets into trouble in school. She cannot even *act* deceit."

"Short and Long is like that," said Chet. "And *he's* going to be barred from athletics if he doesn't have a care. We would be in a mess if we lost our shortstop. Old Dimple——"

"Professor Dimp, you refer to?" interjected his mother.

"Oh, yes!" sighed Chet. "He can't take a joke. And Billy is full of them. Yesterday he got into trouble with Dimple—er—Professor Dimp. The professor had written something on the board—I forget the sentence; but it had the word 'whether' in it. Billy read it as though it was 'weather.' 'Ha!' snapped Dimple in his very nastiest way, 'how do you spell "weather," Master Long?'

"Of course, Short and Long saw his mistake right off, and drawled:

"'W-i-a-t-h-i-a-r.'

"'Sit down! You've given us the worst spell of weather we've had this spring. Recitation zero,' snaps Dimple. Now, wasn't that mean—for just a little joke?"

"It seems to me," said his father, "that the professor had the best of the joke. There's some wit to that Professor Dimp, after all. And your friend, Billy, is too old for childish pranks, even if he is such a little fellow."

The topic of the girls' athletics and the new association was discussed in many homes in Cen-

terport that evening. Nor was it tabooed from conversation on Sunday. By Monday morning, when the pupils of Central High gathered for classes, the girls, at least, were in a buzz of excitement. But they had an added topic of interest, too. The fire in the principal's office on Saturday afternoon was much discussed.

Laura and Jess, with some of the other girls, surrounded Bobby Hargrew the moment she appeared.

"Did you do it on purpose?"

"What are they going to do about it?"

"Is Mr. Sharp awfully mad?"

"Is Gee Gee going to have you expelled?"

These and other questions were fired at Bobby in a volley.

"Hold on! Wait! Help! I'm down!" squealed Bobby. "Give me a chance to answer."

"Well, tell us!" commanded Jess.

"I'll tell you; but half of you won't believe me," said Bobby, rather sullenly. "And that is the way it stands with the faculty. They don't believe me."

"Why, Bobby! I shall certainly believe what you say if you are positive in your statement," declared Laura Belding.

"All right. I'll put you to the test. *I did not set that fire!*"

The girls, for the most part, looked blank. Some of them whispered together. Laura only said:

"You're sure?"

"Pos-i-tive!"

"But the burning punk——?"

"Think I'd chuck it in that basket?" demanded Bobby, scornfully.

"Maybe you thought you put it out?"

"Maybe nothing! I know. I carried that punk out and threw it in the gutter."

"But a spark from it might have fallen in the basket?" said Jess, weakly.

"No, ma'am! I wasn't near the basket. I was at the other end of the desk when Gee Gee caught me," said Bobby, firmly. "Either I did, or I didn't. I say I didn't set that fire."

"Then I believe you, dear," said Laura, suddenly hugging the smaller girl.

"Thanks, Laura. You always were a good sport," said Bobby, having hard work to keep back the tears. "But Gee Gee won't believe me, and if I don't own up to what I didn't do, she says she will 'take it up with Mr. Sharp.' You know what *that* means. I'll likely have to leave school—although good old Dad has already paid for the damage done, and bought new gold-fish."

CHAPTER VI

FALSE EVIDENCE

If there was anything of importance to be threshed out, for the general welfare of the school, Franklin Sharp, principal of Central High, took the topic up at the Morning Assembly. The general standing and deportment of the scholastic body as a whole, rules of conduct laid down by the faculty, or news of importance to the scholars, both male and female, were there detailed.

At 8:25 o'clock the pupils were expected to be in the various class rooms. At 8:30 the gongs called the marching hosts to the great hall at the top of the building. The boys filed in on one side, the girls on the other. Many of the classes throughout the school were mixed classes; but naturally in certain studies the girls and boys were divided, especially the Junior and Senior years.

The High School course consisted of four years of study. Laura Belding and most of her

friends were Sophomores. Therefore they could join in all the advanced athletics proposed by the Girls' Branch Athletic Association.

Mr. Sharp was a tall, scholarly looking man; but his seriousness of countenance was belied somewhat by eyes that twinkled cordially behind his spectacles. He had a quick apprehension of character. He understood boys thoroughly—and most of his male pupils liked Mr. Sharp. But he gave over a deal of the management of the girls to his female assistants—especially to Miss Carrington.

The latter was unquestionably an able woman; she knew the science of teaching and her marks in teachers' examinations were always the highest of any teacher in the Centerport schools. But her outlook upon life *was* awfully serious! Mr. Sharp could have endured better an assistant with a character more lenient to the failings and weaknesses of humanity.

Of course, however, the fire on Saturday could by no means be condoned. In the first place it had come about through a flagrant piece of impudence upon the part of a pupil. The pupils expected to hear from Mr. Sharp about the fire, and they were not disappointed.

"I am compelled to call the attention of the classes to an accident which occurred downstairs

in my office on Saturday," he began. "When we are good-natured enough to allow the school property, entrusted to our care, to be used for purposes aside from the regular class work, we have a right to expect those pupils enjoying the privilege to be more than usually careful of such property.

"I mean this for the attention of the boys as well as the girls," he continued. "The girls, however, are at fault in this instance. It was their meeting that was held in the music room, and they had entrance to my office. Now a new rug is to be bought and my desk repaired, to say nothing of the purchase of four gold-fish—four, I believe, is the number.

"Fire is a dangerous element to play with. I understand that the accident arose out of a so-called joke that one of our brilliant young ladies evolved—and evolved particularly for the disturbance of her teacher. That was not a nice or ladylike thing to do. I believe the culprit understands that fully now.

"But there is always a greater danger than the commission of such an act. That is the denying of the act after it is committed. I hope you all understand that. The old saw of 'A fault confessed is half redressed' has no 'bromide' qualities. It is a fundamental truth. Honesty above

everything—that should be the motto of us all.

"To deny a fault committed, in short, makes the fault a double one. I think I have said enough upon this topic. The faculty will, of course, judge the guilty young woman in this instance as leniently as possible; but we must be just as well as merciful. You are excused to your classes."

Not until the forenoon recess did the sophs, who were Bobby Hargrew's closest friends, have an opportunity of commiserating with her. She had regained her composure by that time, however, and showed a plucky front.

"He intimated that I was untruthful," Bobby said, angrily. "It isn't fair. There is no evidence against me but——"

"But the evidence of the fire itself, Bobby," Nellie Agnew observed, quietly.

"I realize that. It is a mystery. I was last in the office—I was there alone, too. But I know what I did with that piece of punk, and I was not near the basket at any time."

"Don't lose your temper," advised Laura Belding. "That will not help you."

"It's all right for you girls to talk," said Bobby, sadly. "But Mr. Sharp has left it to Gee Gee, and she believes I would tell a story about it."

"Have patience—and hope for the best," said Laura. "The truth will surely come out in the end."

"But when will the end be?" demanded Bobby. "Oh! I think it is too mean for anything!"

"It doesn't pay to get Gee Gee down on you," said Jess. "I'm going to be very careful myself."

"And we'll all have to be careful if we expect to join in these after-school athletics. Gee Gee doesn't fancy the new association, anyway," said one of the Lockwood twins.

"I'm not so awfully eager myself to belong," said Jess. "We've got to wear those ugly suits——"

"And no furbelows," laughed Laura. "Oh, Jess, we all know your failing. Who is more devoted to the fashion magazines and the powder-puff than Josephine Morse?"

"It is the duty of every girl to look her very best at all times," declared Jess, confidently. "My mother says so."

"And that's what makes the boys laugh at us," remarked the other twin—no use saying which one, for nobody knew Dora and Dorothy apart. Gee Gee had long since put them on their honor not to recite for each other!

It was at noon that Miss Carrington called Clara Hargrew to her desk.

"Now, Miss Hargrew, I expect you to tell me the truth about this matter," the teacher said, very sternly.

"I never in my life told you an untruth, ma'am!" exclaimed the girl.

"I have always believed you truthful," admitted the teacher. "But this is a ridiculous claim you make——"

"I *did* carry that piece of punk out and throw it in the guttter."

"Did you look for it there?" asked Miss Carrington, quickly.

"Yes. I looked yesterday morning, even if it was Sunday. But the street men had flushed out the gutters before I arrived."

"That is curious, Miss Hargrew," said the teacher, doubtfully.

"It is the truth. I did not set the fire——"

"Then how did it start?"

"I know no more about it than you do, ma'am."

"Ahem! But you threw something into the basket?"

"I did not. I did not go near the basket."

"You are determined to stick to that, are you, Miss?" asked the teacher, sharply.

"I am determined to tell you nothing but the truth."

"Wait!" commanded the teacher. Then she turned and sent one of the lingering girls at the door of the classroom for Hester Grimes. When Hester came she looked somewhat troubled, but she did not glance at Bobby.

"Miss Grimes," said the teacher, "I have called you to repeat what you said to me before. You must say it before Miss Hargrew."

"I—I don't want to get Clara into any trouble," muttered the red-faced girl.

Bobby looked at her in surprise. "How long since, Hessie?" she demanded. "You never were too tender of me before."

"Be still!" commanded Miss Carrington, angrily. "Miss Grimes!"

"Well, I was the last to leave the office, and I saw Clara throw something into the waste-basket."

"Oo-h!" exclaimed the culprit.

"Yes, I did!" ejaculated Hester.

"You need not be so vociferous, Miss Grimes," said Miss Carrington, tartly. "You see, Clara, we have other evidence than the fire."

"Do you mean to say you saw me throw that burning punk into the basket?" cried Bobby, with flaming face and sparkling eyes.

"Well, you threw *something* into it," replied Hester, weakly.

"That is made up out of whole cloth," began Bobby, but Miss Carrington stopped her.

"That will do! Not another word. I shall take the matter up with Mr. Sharp. You are unmanageable and—I fear—untruthful. Go to your seat. What the outcome of this will be I cannot tell you now; but of one thing I am sure, Miss Hargrew—you can expect no favors from the faculty of the school after this date."

CHAPTER VII

THE COMMITTEE ON ORGANIZATION

AFTER school that day the committee appointed to organize the Girls' Branch Athletic Association of Central High met in one of the offices. There were fifteen of the girls, and they were all present. Mrs. Case had seen to it that the natural leaders of the various classes among Seniors, Juniors and Sophomores were appointed to membership in this committee.

There were six Seniors, five Juniors and four Sophomores—the latter being Laura and Jess and Hester Grimes and her chum, Lily Pendleton. Although Laura was at least three years younger than the oldest Senior, she was popular and was elected chairman of the committee on a single bollot. Besides, the other girls knew that Laura was an enthusiast in athletic matters and that she had studied the question of organization thoroughly.

" Mrs. Case gave each of us a booklet relating to the formation of associations of this charac-

ter," said Laura, when the meeting was called to order. "I suppose you have all studied the little book. It gives us a draft of the proper constitution and by-laws, and information on all points likely to come before us. You all understand it, don't you?"

"My goodness!" exclaimed Lily, yawning. "I haven't even looked into mine."

"I've looked into it, and I see that the teachers have a lot to do with the thing," said Hester Grimes. "I don't like such interference, and right at the start I move we disregard the book and form our own society in our own way."

"Why, we can't do that!" cried Celia Prime, one of the Seniors. "There would be no association then."

"I don't see why not," drawled Lily. "I think Hessie's plan is just grand!"

"It's a grand way to go about not having athletics at all," said Mary O'Rourke, another Senior, laughing. "We can't do business that way, girls."

"Nor would it be wise if we could," Laura said, quickly. "Listen! This is the rule that we have *got* to comply with if we are going to form a Girls' Branch: Any girl to be eligible for membership, or to take part in athletic events for trophies and pins, must have a physician's

certificate of physical fitness, and the personal approval of Mrs. Case."

"A doctor's certificate!" exclaimed Hester, with scorn. "What for?"

"A girl with a weak heart, for instance, will not be allowed to take part in the games and events. You know that. Mrs. Case is dreadfully particular about it."

"And a good thing," said one of the juniors. "I knew of a girl who jumped rope so long that she dropped dead. It was awful."

"Well, who wants to jump rope?" snapped Hester.

"I do," admitted Jess, laughing. "It's fun. And Mrs. Case says it is good exercise under careful conditions."

"I want to learn to dance," said Lily. "And dancing is going to be part of the athletic exercises, isn't it?"

"Folk dancing," said Miss Prime. "And very pretty some of those old-world dances are. No one-steps or glides, Miss!" and she laughed shortly.

"Well, we must make up our minds to follow the rules in the little book," Laura interposed. "You know, every girl must be approved by the principal of the school as being in good standing both in deportment and scholarship, including

the usual work in physical training, or she can't belong."

"That's going to cut out your friend Hargrew, I guess," laughed Lily.

"And we know who are doing their best to put Bobby out of the games," snapped Jess, looking angrily at Hester and her chum.

"Order!" exclaimed Laura, bringing down the gavel with a smack on the desk. "No time for anything but business. Here is another thing, girls: No girl who takes part in athletic competitions outside the school under the auspices of any organization other than our Girls' Branch, can take part in events by the school. If you take part, too, in any sports unsanctioned by our rules, you can be expelled."

"There! I don't like that a bit," flared up Hester again. "I belong to St. Cecilia's Gymnasium Club. I am not going to give up my church club for this public school association."

"That's foolish," remarked Mary O'Rourke. "I belong to a ladies' gymnastic class connected with my church, too; but I know that when we get going in the High School it will be lots more fun to belong to this association than the church club."

Other matters were talked over, as well; but the opinion of the majority was for bringing in

a report recommending the new association to follow exactly the line of organization of other Girls' Branches in other cities. Hester and Lily said they should offer a minority report; but the others only laughed at that.

"You know that's ridiculous, Hester," said Mary O'Rourke. "We have to do something besides merely report a form of organization. If we girls—and those who follow us at Central High for years to come—are going to have successful after-hour athletics, we must have equipment—and a field. Just think of *that,* please. It is going to cost money—a heap of money!—before we get through. And who is going to supply the money? If we go against the opinions and desires of those who are helping us we can't expect them to supply funds."

"Oh, I guess my father will give as much as anybody," said Hester, tossing her head. Henry Grimes was a wholesale butcher and was accounted a very wealthy man in Centerport. He was a member of the Board of Aldermen and wielded much political influence.

"I suppose we must interest more than our parents in the plan," said Laura, thoughtfully. "From what I read in that little book, some of the girls' athletic fields in the big cities have cost upwards of a hundred thousand dollars to

build and equip. Of course, that includes a clubhouse, and swimming pool, and all that."

"A nice time we'd have trying to get anything like that in Centerport," sneered Hester.

"Well, I don't know about that," spoke up Celia Prime. "We have some very wealthy people here."

"Just think what Colonel Richard Swayne might do with some of his money—if he wanted to," said Laura.

"My father says that of course the burden will come upon the parents who are well-to-do. It's always the way," said Hester. "The rich have to do for the poor."

This was a tactless speech, to say the least, for Mary O'Rourke's father was merely a day laborer, and several of the other girls on the committee were from poor families.

"I expect that the money part of it will not be within our jurisdiction," said Miss Prime, sharply.

"No, we haven't got to worry about that," laughed Laura.

"That's all very well," said Hester. "But my father will be called upon to give more than yours, Laura. He always is."

"He is better able to give, perhaps," returned Laura, coolly.

"There will have to be some large donor, if we are to have a real, up-to-date athletic field," sighed Celia. "The boys have a good baseball and football park. The railroad company gave the land, and public subscription put it in shape. But we have just *got* to interest some rich person in our project."

"Colonel Swayne, for instance?" laughed Mary.

"Well, why not?" demanded Laura, suddenly.

"Why, he just *hates* boys and girls!" cried her chum.

"So they say."

"You know he won't allow one of us to step on his grounds—and it's right next to our bathing place, too," said Jess, with a considerable show of feeling.

"He doesn't seem to love a soul but that married daughter of his—you know, the widow. She's a peculiar acting woman. I don't believe she's quite right," said Miss Prime. "And he certainly is wrapped up in her."

"And with all that money—and his beautiful estate," sighed Laura. "He really ought to be interested in girls' athletics."

The others laughed. "We'll appoint Miss Belding a committee of one to try and separate

Colonel Swayne from some of his wealth," said Mary O'Rourke.

"I accept!" declared Laura, suddenly, with flashing eyes. "I believe it can be done."

"Huh! you think you're so smart, Laura," drawled Lily Pendleton.

"But it would be just *great* if we could get him interested," sighed Jess.

"Leave it to me," said Laura, boldly. "I'm going to try!"

CHAPTER VIII

LAURA AND THE PRINCIPAL

It was two days later, during which time the two principal topics of conversation among the girls of Central High had been athletics and Bobby Hargrew's trouble. All sorts of rumors sped from lip to lip regarding Bobby's fate. They had her dismissed, or suspended, a dozen times, an reinstated again. But the only thing that was really known about it was that Gee Gee had "taken up" with Mr. Sharp.

The girls had a great deal of faith in Mr. Sharp's sense of justice. He was a man who made up his mind leisurely, although once it was made up he was not known to change it for any light reason. The girls liked him very much indeed; but of course there were times when the principal, as well as the rest of the teachers, was arraigned against the pupils upon some topic. That will always be so as long as there are pupils and teachers!

In the case of Bobby, some of the girls—especially those of her own age and class, and more

especially some who looked up to the harum-scarum Hargrew girl as a leader in mischief—angrily upheld the culprit's side of the controversy, and declared that Gee Gee had no business to accuse her of setting the fire at all Bobby's saying she didn't do it was enough!

The Central High students—girls and boys alike—were governed on honor. A student's word was supposed to be taken without his or her going before a notary public and "swearing" to the truth of the statement. That was Mr. Sharp's own statement. So, why make a divergence from the accepted rule in poor Bobby's case? Why not believe her when she said she did not throw the burning punk into the wastepaper basket?

Upon the score of Hester Grimes's testimony against the accused girl there was division, too. Some of Hester's classmates were for ostracizing her entirely—"sending her to Coventry." She was a "tattle-tale"—and some of the girls were quite warm over her case.

But they all knew Hester. She had a certain popularity among some of the girls because of her father's wealth, and the lavish way in which Hester entertained those girls whom she wished to favor. Money will always bring a certain kind of subservience. Although the general

opinion was adverse to Hester, nothing was really done about it.

Laura and Jess, with Chet and his chum, Lance Darby, were sitting on the Beldings' porch, for it was a warm evening.

"Something ought to be done to that Grimes girl," drawled Chet, reflectively. "She's always doing something mean."

"That's the worst of you girls," said Lance, with a superior air. "If one of you gets into trouble, the others either stand off or pick on her."

"Isn't that so?" cried Chet. "I saw Bobby walking home from school this afternoon all alone."

"You bet if she'd been a boy," said Lance, importantly, "there'd been a crowd of fellows with her."

"Is that so?" flared up Jess. "Don't you ever fight, you boys? And do you always stand by one another when one gets into trouble? How about what you did to Pretty Sweet last Saturday? Oh! I heard about it."

Lance and Chet broke into loud laughter. Laura said, hurriedly:

"Stop! here he comes now. And I believe he is coming here."

In the twilight they saw a rather tall boy, dressed in the height of fashion, with brightly

polished shoes and an enormously high collar, coming down Whiffle Street.

"Won't you come in, Purt?" called Laura, as this youth reached the gate.

Prettyman Sweet hesitated just a moment. Indeed, his hand was really on the gate before he saw the two boys—his classmates—sitting beside the girls on the porch.

"Oh-oo, no! I am afraid I can't this evening, Miss Laura," he said, in a high, "lady-like" voice. "Thank you *so* much! Good-evening," and he hurried away.

"See how he walks?" chuckled Darby.

"You needn't have asked him in to sit down, Laura," said her brother. "He *can't* sit down."

"Takes his meals off the mantelpiece, I understand," pursued Lance.

"Hasn't been to school this week. His mother sent a note to Dimple. Pretty is all broken up."

"*Do* tell us all about it, boys!" urged Jess, laughing, too, now. "I heard that he had some unfortunate accident up at the railroad fill Saturday. What was it—really?"

The two boys exploded with laughter again, but finally Chet said:

"Some of us fellows were up there at the fill watching that big 'sand-hog' at work—the new steam shovel, you know; and Pretty Sweet was along. However he came to walk clear over

there in those toothpick shoes of his, I don't know. But he was there.

"On the old 'dump' where the city ashes used to be deposited, one of the boys—Short and Long, I think it was, eh, Lance?"

"It was Billy," said his chum, decidedly.

"I bet Billy was in it—if it meant mischief," laughed Laura.

"Oh, the kid was innocent enough," Chet declared. "He saw something shining on the ground and pointed it out. It really looked just like a lump of gold—didn't it, Lance?"

"Something like. *I* didn't know what it was."

"Two or three of us handled it But it took Pretty Sweet to turn the trick all proper. He slipped it in his hip pocket. You know, Pretty is just as stingy as he can be—a regular miser despite all his fine clothes. I expect he believed that shiny lump might be worth something. Maybe he was going to bring it down to father, to see if was sure enough gold," laughed Chet.

"But what was it? What happened?" cried Jess.

"Why, nothing happened at first. Then, when we were half way back to town, somebody saw smoke spurting out behind Pretty Sweet as though he was an automobile. We yelled and went for him, rolled him in the street——"

"In all those good clothes!" interposed Lance between bursts of laughter.

"And we put the fire out. For he really *was* afire," said Chet, when he got his voice again. "And he was burned some—so he said. He declared one of the fellows had played a trick on him—set him afire, you know.

"So he got mad," continued Chet, "and went off by himself. But going through Laurel Street he burst into flames again, so to speak, and if it hadn't been that he was right near the fire station, I guess we'd have had a bigger conflagration at that end of the town than there was in Mr. Sharp's office."

"But I don't understand!" cried Laura, puzzled.

"Neither did the fireman, who turned a chemical extinguisher on Pretty Sweet and messed him all up again. It was a serious matter to Pretty, I tell you. For this time the tails of his coat were burned off, as well as a portion of his nether garments. Why, he wasn't fit to be seen!" roared Chet. "The firemen were for sending him home in a barrel; but Pretty wouldn't have it. He sent for a cab and paid a dollar to get home."

"But what made the fire? What did you boys do to him?" cried Jess.

"Nothing at all. We never touched him,"

declared Lance Darby. "But when we told Professor Dimp, on Monday, when he inquired about the absence of Sweet, he seemed to suspect what had caused the fire. And he laughed, too."

"Do tell us what it was?" cried Laura.

"Why, it must have been a piece of phosphorus he picked up and put in his pocket. Dimple says it is very active chemically, and when united with oxygen, even at an ordinary temperature, emits a faint glow as if it were gold. It got in its fine work on Pretty Sweet, however, and they say he's got a blister on him as big as your hat!" concluded Chet.

The girls could not fail to be amused at this ridiculous adventure of the school exquisite. No other boy of their acquaintance was so dudish or comic in dress and manner.

"You know what Bobby did to Purt at Hester Grimes's party last winter, don't you?" said Jess, recovering from her paroxysm of laughter.

"The first time he wore his tall hat, you mean?" demanded Chet.

"Yes."

"I know he had to have the hat blocked again after once wearing," said Lance. "But we fellows weren't in on that joke."

"And not many but Bobby knew about it. You see, that tall hat—think of a stovepipe hat

on a boy of seventeen!—made Purt the tallest person at the party. Bobby is cute, now I tell you," Jess giggled. "She measured his height *with* the hat on his head and then went out to the gate and hung a flour bag of sand between the tall gateposts. She hung it so as to clear everybody else's head, you see; and it was dark there by the gate.

"Out comes Purt, beauing Celia Prime home. The bag was on his side of the path and he got it good, now I tell you!"

"I know he got his new hat smashed," agreed Lance.

"Great scheme," chuckled Chet.

"But it was dangerous," said Laura. "That sandbag was heavy. If any taller person had been coming in, or going out, rapidly, a crack on the crown from that bag would have done him harm.

"All right, little Miss Fidget," growled her brother. "But you see, it didn't do any harm."

"Only to Pretty's hat," laughed Lance. "But the question is, did Bobby set the fire?"

"Of course not!" declared Jess, promptly.

"If she did, she's getting to be a regular little fire-bug," said Chet. "Did you hear about what happened at her father's store Saturday?"

"No," said Jess. "What was it? Not another fire?"

"Yes, another fire," returned Chet, and he went on to repeat the story of the burning-glass, and how Laura had beaten the fire department in putting the blaze out.

"My, Laura! that was a smart idea," declared Lance, with admiration.

"Isn't that the greatest ever?" added Jess.

"And Bobby had less to do with setting the fire in Mr. Sharp's office than she had with starting that one in the store," said Laura, thoughtfully.

"I hope so," Lance said.

"I know so! Bobby is strictly truthful."

"But she can't prove it," said Chet, argumentatively.

"She ought not to have to prove it," declared Laura, with heat. "Her say-so should be enough for Mr. Sharp. I've a mind to——"

"You've a mind to what?" asked Jess, pinching her arm.

"Never you mind," returned Laura, suddenly becoming uncommunicative. "I've a scheme."

"One of Laura's brilliant ideas," scoffed Chet, with brotherly scorn. "We'll hear about it later."

Which was true enough, for none of them heard about it that evening. But the very next morning Laura got to school early and went to Mr. Sharp's office. The principal chanced to be

disengaged, and welcomed her kindly. Besides, Mr. Sharp, like the other teachers, was fond of Laura Belding. Without being a "toady"—that creature so hateful to the normal young person—Laura was very good friends with all the instructors.

"Mr. Sharp," said the girl, boldly, "one of my classmates is in trouble—serious trouble. You know whom I mean—Miss Hargrew."

Mr. Sharp nodded thoughtfully.

"I want you to be just as kind to her as you can, sir," went on Laura. "She is a good girl, if she *is* mischievous. She never would do such a wicked thing as to set that fire——"

"Not intentionally, I grant you, Miss Belding," he returned.

"No. Nor did she do it involuntarily. When she said she took the burning piece of punk out of the building, she *did* so."

"How do you know?" he asked, quickly.

"I know it," said Laura, calmly, "because she tells me so. Bobby—I mean, Clara—could not tell a lie. It is not in her to be false or deceitful. That—that is why she is not liked in some quarters."

"You mean, that is why she is doubted?" said the principal, gravely "Her careless course in school could not fail to gain her a bad character with the instructors."

"I presume that is so, sir," admitted Laura, slowly.

"It is so. You cannot blame the teachers if they are harsh with her. She has made herself a nuisance," said the principal, yet smiling.

"She has never done a really mean thing——"

"It is mean to trouble the teachers," said the principal, quickly. "You must admit that, Miss Belding. They are here to instruct and help you students. They should not be made the butt of foolish jokes."

"I suppose that is true, sir Bobby has been guilty there. But she would never tell an untruth."

"You seem very sure of your school friend, Miss Belding?" he questioned, thoughtfully.

"As sure of her truthfulness as I am of my own, sir," declared Laura, firmly.

Mr. Sharp looked at her for a few moments, tapping the edge of his desk thoughtfully meanwhile. Finally he said:

"Miss Belding, you almost succeed in convincing me against my better judgment. I believe you are wrong, however. I believe Miss Hargrew, frightened by the enormity of her careless act, has slipped in the path of truth for once. But, wait!" he added, holding up his hand. "You may be right; I may be wrong. I am willing, upon your representation, to give the

girl another chance. I will wait. Let time pass. If there is another explanation of the fire—if there *can* be such a mystery—we will give it time to come to light."

"Oh, Mr. Sharp! You will not suspend her, then?" cried Laura.

"She is very near expulsion, not suspension," said the principal, gravely. "But I promise you to do nothing until the end of the year. If the mystery is not explained before she finishes her sophomore year, however, I do not believe we can let her go into the Junior class. That is final, Miss Belding.

"Nor can the culprit go scot-free now. None of the good times for her. She must bear herself well in deportment, too. None of the after-hour athletics for her, Miss Belding. And she will have to walk very circumspectly to retain her place in the school."

Laura went away from the principal's office, after thanking him warmly, in a much worried state of mind. They needed Bobby Hargrew in the proposed athletics. Part of the girls of Central High were very much interested in rowing. There was a good crew of eight in the sophomore class, and they had practiced in one of the boys' boats already. And for that eight, Bobby Hargrew was slated to be coxswain.

CHAPTER IX

"THE DAY OF THE TOUCH"

THE girls of Central High took hold of the regular physical exercises with renewed eagerness these days. Although this work had always been popular with the few, now the many began to show unwonted interest. There was "fun" in prospect.

Mrs. Case was a fine physical instructor—the best, indeed, in Centerport. In the beginning she had had to meet much opposition in her work. Dr. Agnew, of the Board of Health, had been her efficient aid in making parents see that the innovation of physical exercises in the school work was a good thing. Now the majority of the girls' parents admitted the advisability and value of gymnasium training. But some missionary work was still to be done in the homes regarding the suggested "after-hour" athletics for girls.

A healthy interest in the sports allowed by the Girls' Branch would aid in keeping the girls

themselves from a more questionable use of their spare time. It was much more healthful and much more wise for them to take part in sports and exercises calculated to build up muscle and mind, than to parade the streets in couples, or cliques, or to attend picture shows, or to idle their time through the big stores in emulation of the adult "shopping-fiend."

As boys are made more manly by physical exercise and sports, so girls can be made more womanly by them. A healthy girlhood is the finest preparation obtainable for the higher duties of life. As Dr. Agnew, Nellie's father, was fond of saying: "I don't care how much of a bookworm a girl is, if she swings a pair of two and a half-pound Indian clubs, she'll come out all right!"

The report of the organization committee was adopted at an enthusiastic meeting on the following Saturday. Mrs. Case promised that money for equipment of at least one basket-ball court, better swimming facilities, and the preparation of a field for track athletics would be supplied.

The Board of Education would do some of this work. A field on the edge of Lake Luna—right behind the school's swimming pool, and adjoining Colonel Swayne's estate—had been obtained and in a few weeks track athletics could

be practised there. A fence was to be built to screen the girls from too much publicity, and the paths for running laid out. Tennis courts might be established here, too, if the money held out.

In the basement of the Central High building was a well equipped gymnasium, open to the girls and boys on alternate days. But not many games of skill could be played there. For one thing, the ceiling was not high enough. And the girls—many of them—were eager to learn basket-ball, captain's ball, tennis, and other vigorous sports approved by the Girls' Branch Association.

It was approaching that important day in the school year at Central High when the M. O. R.'s "touched" those girls selected for membership. That certain Friday afternoon was looked forward to by most of the sophs and juniors with much anxiety. The freshmen had no part in it. The faculty did not allow the freshmen to belong to the secret society; but it was something for the sophs and juniors particularly to strive for.

Some of the girls passed through the entire four years' course without being chosen for membership in the M. O. R.'s. But a girl who was popular in her class, stood well in her studies, was approved by the teachers for her deportment, and displayed wit and skill in anything at all, was

quite sure of being chosen in either her third or fourth year; but few sophomores were "called." Therefore it was considered a particular honor to become an M. O. R. in the second year at the school.

This Friday afternoon, known as "the day of the touch," all the girls of Central High gathered in the girls' yard The M. O. R.'s had a modest club house—an old-fashioned three-story, narrow dwelling on the same street as the school, and only a block away—and from that house the committee of nomination marched to the crowded schoolyard.

The committee consisted of four of the seniors who had longest been members of the secret society. They walked through the crowd of girls and with the little be-ribboned baton each carried touched upon the shoulder the girls selected for initiation.

Girls thus indicated were supposed to go home at once and wait for the committee to call for them that evening. Then they would be introduced to the club; but the initiation would come later. There was always something of a novel nature connected with the yearly initiation of candidates.

It was both an honor and a social privilege to be "touched" for the M. O. R.'s. Both

Laura Belding and Josephine Morse desired greatly to be among the favored few of the sophomores to gain this boon. But nobody could prophesy which girls would be chosen.

Of course, the freshmen remained to " see the fun " and swell the crowd. And such girls as Bobby Hargrew hung about for the same reason, for there was no more chance of Bobby's obtaining the honor of a " touch " than that she should go sailing around the moon!

As for Laura and her chum, however, their hearts beat high. They *hoped.*

And when Celia Prime came toward them with her baton the chums almost held their breaths. You could not tell by Celia's face whom she intended to touch. She weaved in and out among the girls, many of whom were silent and watchful, others chattering away like magpies. But there was little " fooling " and " carrying-on," although Laura saw that Bobby Hargrew was following Celia very closely and that the perfect gravity of the mischief-maker's countenance was sufficient to warn all who knew her well that there was " something up."

The next moment Laura was startled to feel a touch upon her shoulder—right in the spot where she had been told the baton was always placed. She turned swiftly. Mary O'Rourke

had gone past. It was *she* who had touched Laura instead of Miss Prime.

"Oh, Laura!" whispered Jess in her ear. "I've got it!"

"Got what?" demanded Laura.

"The touch. Celia gave it to me. And you?"

"Miss O'Rourke, I believe," whispered Laura, just as eagerly. "Come on! let's go home."

"Goody! Oh, I'm so glad!" gasped Jess.

As they went out of the school premises they saw Hester Grimes hurrying out of the other gateway.

"Do you suppose *she* is chosen, too?" asked Jess, doubtfully.

"I don't know. I saw Celia going toward her. Ah! there's Bobby Hargrew right behind Hester. What's that she's got in her hand—a stick?"

"Hey, Bobby!" shouted Jess.

But Bobby, giving her chums one glance, began to laugh silently, pointing at the unconscious Hester's back, and then ran away, giggling.

"Now, what do you suppose that means?" demanded Jess.

"I really do not know. But Bobby is up to something. I wish she wouldn't act so," said Laura, with a sigh.

CHAPTER X

THE JOKE ON HESTER

After all, Centerport was just a big, inland town. It was no metropolis. Especially was the neighborhood of Central High mostly of that comfortable residential quality that is the charm of most old towns. Central High was the new school, East and West Highs being both smaller and much older buildings.

This middle of the city was called "on the hill" and was really much higher than the surrouding flatland where the business section of the city had originally been built. Two railroads ran into the town and its water freighting was considerable.

At the westerly end of beautiful Luna Lake Rocky River flowed into it at Lumberport, another thriving city; at the easterly end of the lake the waters flowed out through Rolling River at Keyport. These smaller cities each supported a good High School, and the rivalry in boys' sports among the five schools of this district had always been keen.

Now it was proposed that the girls should strive for the honor of the schools and it was reported from Lumberport and Keyport that the Girls' Branches had been organized in the high schools of those towns with great enthusiasm. Centerport's East and West schools were slower to respond. Central High usually led the way in most innovations.

The knoll on which Central High and the surrounding residences stood sloped easily toward the shore of the lake. Along the lake shore, although it was in the very heart of the city, lay several fine estates. The city was slowly condemning some of these and turning them into public parks and playgrounds. Here the three high schools had their bathing pavilions, and it was also at this point that Central High had been fortunate in obtaining the field to be devoted to the girls' athletics.

This was a convenient location for all the scholars attending Central High, a breezy piece of ground with a splendid outlook over the lake and to Cavern Island, in its center. Cavern Island was an immensely popular picnic ground, and in the summer season excursion boats that plied the lake made landings at it. But a portion of the island was wild and woody enough to please the most romantic.

Whiffle Street was shaded with great elm trees. Indeed, all that vicinity of Central High was shady and quiet. Almost all the houses on the street had lawns and well-kept gardens. Henry Grimes's house—much more ornate and imposing than the Belding's home—stood three or four blocks along the street from where Laura and Chet lived.

The nominating committee of the M. O. R.'s appeared in Whiffle Street just about dusk. They had already gathered most of the girls selected for initiation, and quite a column of laughing young people walked, two by two, behind their four sponsors.

They brought forth Josephine Morse from her mother's little cottage at the end of the street —"the poverty end" Jess always called it— and then approached the Belding house. Laura was on the porch, eager enough; she had noticed ere they arrived, however, an unaccountable gathering of freshmen and other girls farther along the street—toward the Grimes house. Bobby was with that crowd, and much laughter came from it.

"I wonder what those children can be up to?" wondered Laura.

But when the head of the procession of candidates for M. O. R. honors appeared Laura for-

got the freshies and Bobby and ran down the walk to join the older girls Miss Prime had beckoned to her

"Fall in line, Miss Belding," commanded the senior, and Laura did so.

The procession continued along the street, followed by the laughing comments of the adults who leaned upon the gates, or sat on the porches of the houses it passed. At the Grimes's gate the crowd of freshmen opened solemnly to let the older girls through.

Upon the Grimes's porch stood Hester and Lily. Indeed, Hester ran down the steps when the head of the M. O. R. candidates reached the gate. But the procession kept right on. Neither Miss Prime, nor Mary O'Rourke, or the other two seniors looked Miss Grimes's way.

"Why, I thought you said you were touched, Hessie?" cried Lily, in her high drawl.

There was immense giggling on the part of the freshmen crew outside the gate. But Bobby hushed it by a sharp:

"Attention!"

Silence followed among the crew. Bobby stepped forward, drew a baton be-ribboned like those carried by the nominating committee of the M. O. R. She raised it on high. It was noticeable that most of her companions had bits

of paper in their hands; from these papers they proceeded to chant the following:

"Where Bedelia wore her necklace
Where the cow had tonsilitis
Where the chicken got the hatchet
Where the graceful swan's delight is
"Oh!
"Where the fat man's collar pinches
Where the hangman ties the noose
Where the lady wears the boa
Where the farmer grabs the goose
"Oh! Oh!
"Where Napoleon received it
When he fought at Waterloo,
In that very same location
Little Hester got it, too!
"Oh! Oh! Oh-ho-ho!"

The procession of candidates passed on; but they heard, and the whole street heard! And for fear anybody should fail to understand the trick that had been played upon the unfortunate daughter of the wholesale butcher, Bobby cried:

"Notice my baton? Don't you want to be 'touched' with it, too, Lily? Oh, my!"

Hester could not even speak. She ran into the house to escape the laughter. Never had

Bobby Hargrew played so cruel a joke. But she had been stung pretty hard by the false testimony Hester had given against her anent the fire at the school; and for once Bobby had not been above "getting square."

But had the girl known what would result from this practical joke of hers—had she for a moment suspected how one of her very best friends would be caused to suffer for *her* sin, honest Bobby would have gone to Hester Grimes there and then and most humbly begged her pardon.

CHAPTER XI

THE MAN ON THE SPIRE

WALKING was included in the athletics approved by the Girls' Branch and the girls of Central High did not have to wait for the athletic field to be put into condition before they took part in this most accessible and perhaps wisest of all physical exercises.

Many a famous athlete has kept himself in perfect training for years by little more than a straight-away walk of a few miles each day. Walking brings into play more muscles than almost any other exercise—and muscles that are of "practical" use, too. Mrs. Case had planned for eight walks during each school year for both her elementary and advanced classes. For the younger girls the longest walk was not over three miles. The advanced girls, however, after training by much walking on Saturdays, were advanced steadily from two, to three, then four, then six, then eight, and finally to a ten mile walk. Only those girls of the sophomores,

juniors and seniors in the best physical condition were allowed to take these longer walks.

On the Saturday after "touching day" of the M. O. R. came the first of the two mile walks to be carried out that season. The girls gathered at the schoolhouse at two o'clock and Mrs. Case looked them over carefully.

"Miss Morse, I cannot approve of those shoes. I have told you before that any girl is foolish to wear high heels and attempt to keep up any pace in walking," was the athletic instructor's comment.

"But, Mrs. Case! these are only Cuban heels," cried poor Jess.

"That makes no difference. Some girls might be able to wear that heel with comfort. Not you, Miss Morse. Your instep is not high enough. You are cramping your foot. First thing you know your arches will begin to fall. Then you will know what suffering is, young lady. It is bad shoeing that makes so many people suffer from 'flatfoot.' Haven't you a pair of comfortable shoes in your locker?"

"Yes, ma'am," admitted the girl who followed the fashions so assiduously.

"And what's that on your face, Miss"

"P—p—powder!" stammered Jess, while some of the other girls giggled.

"Well, powder on one's face may be all right if one has a greasy, coarse skin. But I did not think your complexion was of that nature. Take a little of it off, please. We don't wish to attract any more attention than possible going through the street. Next thing, I suppose, some of you girls will begin to use rouge—pah!"

Some of the other girls rubbed their own cheeks and noses on the sly. And some smiled knowingly at Lily Pendleton. Lily's face to-day was almost as highly colored as that of her chum, Hester. But Hester's complexion was naturally red and coarse, whereas ordinarily Lily had no more color than the flower for which she was named.

Mrs. Case chanced to overlook Miss Pendleton's rosy cheeks, however, and they filed out of the school house, Mrs. Case walking with the last girl.

Laura and Jess were ahead, for they knew the route selected. There was no attempt in any of these walks to make fast time; nor did the instructor allow them to stroll. The idea was to go at a comfortable, straight-away pace, and to rest when tired. The pace was that at which the least active girl could walk comfortably.

At the resting points Mrs. Case usually gave little lectures upon the exercise, or discussed

questions of athletics, or informed the girls upon historical points or public buildings which they passed. This day the route lay down the hill, across Market Street, and out through the east end of the city.

At the corner of Rowan Street they passed a big open lot where boys were flying kites. There was a brisk wind and one youngster was just putting into the air a kite which the girls watched for a few moments. But there was something much more interesting going on a couple of blocks beyond.

There had been a heavy thunder-storm during the week and lightning had damaged the steeple of St. Cecelia's Episcopal Church a few feet below the apex. How much damage had been done the masonry could not easily be learned without making a close examination and the fire insurance adjuster had sent a professional steeple climber to make it.

Quite a crowd had gathered in the square to watch the work of this expert, and as the girls came up the steeple-jack had just passed out at the belfry at the foot of the spire. Two men came with him to set up and hold a ladder which reached some distance up the steeple.

The man mounted this ladder very quickly. At the top he passed a rope around his body and

around the steeple, and then began to work upward. It looked like a very dangerous feat, and the girls were all interested in it. He mounted steadily and soon reached the place where the lightning had struck. Here his progress ceased and he seemed to be trying to adjust the rope.

"He's stuck!" exclaimed Jess. "Don't you see?"

"Oh, I guess not," returned Laura.

But seconds grew into minutes, minutes slipped away, and still he seemed unable to move, and the anxious spectators below became more and more apprehensive.

Finally from his giddy height the man was seen to pause and wave his hand, as if signalling to the men at the foot of the ladder. But they were sixty feet below him and it was evident that they did not hear his words at first. Finally they seemed to understand, and one of them came down inside the belfry and joined a group of men in the porch of the church.

The girls had crossed over to the porch and could hear all that was said.

"I told you he was stuck," said Jess, excitedly.

And it was a fact. They learned that the steeple-jack's rope had caught in a crevice where the lightning bolt had forced the stones apart, and he was unable to move up or down. His

signal was for help, but the men did not know what to do. Many schemes were hastily suggested; but nobody could climb the steeple to aid him, and how to get another rope up to him was a problem that nobody seemed able to solve.

The man was in a serious predicament. One of the onlookers—a tall old man with a flowing white beard, became much excited.

"That's Colonel Swayne," whispered Hester Grimes. "He is one of the church wardens."

"We must aid the man. He cannot stay in that position long," declared Col. Swayne. "He'll fall out of that sling. Come!" he added, addressing the crowd in the square. "I'll give ten dollars to anybody who will suggest a practical method of getting the man down."

The girls were so interested that the walking exercise was forgotten for the time being. They gathered around Mrs. Case, and some of them began to cry.

"The man will fall! He'll be killed!" was the general opinion.

But Laura had separated from the other girls and in a moment was running across the square. Nobody noticed her departure. She disappeared around the corner and in ten minutes returned with two or three boys in tow. One of the boys carried an immense kite.

"Colonel Swayne!" cried Laura, from the outskirts of the crowd, "if you will let us try, I believe we can get a line to that man on the steeple."

"What's that, young lady?" demanded the old gentleman, quickly.

"You will pay the boys for their kite if it is lost, won't you?" the girl asked.

"Of course we will!" exclaimed the warden. "I see your scheme. You're a smart girl. Can you get that kite up here in the square, boys?"

The boys said they would try. But it was Laura who advised them upon the direction of the wind, and how to raise the kite properly. She had flown kites with Chet more than once.

They tested the wind, selected the point from which to fly the kite, and the increasing crowd of spectators watched with breathless interest. Slowly the kite left the ground and rose above the treetops. The wind was steady and it rose faster and faster as they paid out the line. Finally the kite was above the steeple.

The steeple-jack understood what they were attempting, and waved his hand to them. The kite-string was manipulated so as to bring it within the man's reach. He grasped it, and a cheer went up from the crowd.

But there was more to follow. Laura had

sent one of the boys to a store for a hundred yards of clothes line. This was attached by one end to the kite string, and the man on the steeple cut the kite loose and drew up the clothes line.

When he held the heavier line a piece of stronger rope was attached to the clothes line and that was raised, too. Down fell the coil of clothes line, and they saw the steeple-jack rig himself a new sling, by which he soon descended to the ladder, and by the ladder to the church roof and safety.

The crowd cheered when this was accomplished, and Colonel Swayne broke through the throng about Laura.

"You are certainly a quick-witted girl," he said, shaking her by the hand. "You are her teacher, are you?" he added to Mrs. Case. "Humph! from Central High, are you? Well, if all your young ladies are as quick-witted as she it must be a pleasure to teach them."

He placed a ten dollar gold piece in Laura's hand, and Laura whispered to Mrs. Case that she wanted to get away quickly from the spot.

"Those other men are coming, too," she whispered. "Let's go before they all want to shake hands. Do, do come away, Mrs. Case!"

The athletic instructor laughed and nodded, and Laura and Jess took up the line of march

again. But when they were well away from the crowd, Jess began to laugh.

"Who says we can't get money from Colonel Swayne for our Athletic Association?" she cried. "What a smart girl you are, Laura!"

"I'm going to give this ten dollars into the treasury. And it won't be the last money I get from Clonel Swayne for the same object—now you see!"

CHAPTER XII

THE M. O. R. INITIATION

Now there was one girl of that walking party, you may be sure, who did not congratulate Laura Belding upon her happy thought in aiding the man on the steeple of St. Cecelia's Church. That was Hester Grimes.

Since the evening previous Hester had had little to say to anybody—even to her chum. The fires of wrath always burned deeply in Hester; she hugged an injury—or a supposed injury—to her, and made it greater therefore than it was.

In the first place, she had hoped much that the M. O. R.'s would give her the "touch." For months—ever since she had become a soph at Central High, indeed, she had been looking forward to that end. She wanted to "make" the secret society more than she wanted anything else in her school life.

And now it would be another year, at least, before she could stand her chance again, while

Laura Belding, whom she hated, was one of the favored candidates. She could not understand it. Hester had toadied to juniors and seniors alike—especially to those who were members of the secret society. Of course, she had paid little attention to such girls as Mary O'Rourke. She could not understand how the daughter of a laborer, who had neither money nor influence, could have become a prominent member of the M. O. R.'s. But by the girls of wealthy parents Hester had tried to make herself noticed.

She could not understand her lack of popularity, when Laura, and Jess Morse, and Dr. Agnew's daughter and the Lockwood twins had received the touch. And rage burned hotter in her heart.

Besides, Bobby's impudent trick had made Hester appear ridiculous, she could not forget that. And she insisted upon holding Laura responsible for the joke. She told Lily she was sure that Laura Belding had put Bobby up to it. And it was nothing that would pass over quickly. Already, on this Saturday, she had heard some of the lines of the doggerel repeated by giggling girls—and she hated them all for it!

"I'll get square—you just see," she whispered to Lily Pendleton. "No girl like Laura Belding can treat me so——"

"But it was those freshies and Bobby Hargrew," interposed her chum.

"Laura was back of it—believe me!" declared Hester, shaking her head. "I should think you would feel the slight, too, Lily. For those stuck-up M. O. R.'s to choose Belding, and Morse, and those other girls of our class, and overlook *us*."

"But the candidates had nothing to do with it," said Lily, weakly.

"Belding and the others benefited, just the same—didn't they?"

"Um—m. They're in and we're out."

"Well!" said Hester, with flashing eyes.

"But what are you going to do about it? What *can* we do?"

"Never mind. You'll see," promised the butcher's daughter, darkly.

It would not have changed Hester's attitude at all—for she was not one to easily forgive—had she known that Laura Belding had taken occasion that very morning to take Bobby Hargrew to task for what she had done the evening before. Bobby came into Mr. Belding's store while Laura was dusting and re-arranging the show cases.

"Have a scrumptious time at the club house, Laura?" asked the irrepressible.

"Oh, it is nice, Bobby!" cried Laura. "I wish you had been touched."

"Me? Huh! I'd have about as much chance of ever being an M. O. R. as Hester Grimes," and she chuckled.

"Less chance than Hester, I fear," said Laura, with sudden gravity. "Especially after last evening. Bobby Hargrew, I never knew you to do so mean a thing before."

"Well, wasn't she mean to me?"

"That does not excuse you. And I told Mr. Sharp that you had never done a really mean thing within my knowledge——"

"Ah! Now I see why I have not been promoted to the outside of Central High," cried Bobby, quickly. "You have been interceding for me."

"I—I—— Well, it was nothing much I said, dear," said Laura.

"I'm grateful," said Bobby, really moved. "But I can't tell you how much."

"Show me, then," urged Laura.

"How do you mean?"

"Give up this practical joking. Stop making trouble for the teachers——"

"I have! Gee Gee hasn't had a chance to criticize me all this week. And sometimes I feel as though I should burst," cried the spirited girl.

"But I *did* tell the principal that you never

did anything mean—and see what you have done to Hester!"

"And see what she has done to me," snapped Bobby.

"Perhaps she *thought* she saw you throw something into that basket."

"No, she didn't. She and I sassed each other," declared Bobby, who was plain if not elegant of speech at all times, "right there in the principal's office when Miss Gee Gee sailed out into the music room. Hessie *was* the last girl to leave me—true enough. But she did not see me near that basket, for I started for the corridor when she was going out of the room."

"But she might have been mistaken——"

"You don't more than half believe me yourself, Laura Belding!" accused Bobby.

"I do. I believe just what you say about it."

"Then you can take it from me," said the emphatic Bobby, "that Hester Grimes told that story to Miss Carrington for the sake of getting me into trouble—and for no other reason."

"I'd hate to think her so mean," sighed Laura.

"I'd hate to be foolish enough to believe she was anything *but* mean," growled Bobby, sullenly. "We've always known what she was. Why so tender of her all of a sudden?"

"But she must be hurt dreadfully by that trick you played on her last evening."

"Serves her right, then. I've no love for her, I confess. But if you don't want me to I'll let her strictly alone hereafter. I guess I've squared things pretty well with her anyway," and Bobby Hargrew laughed lightly.

"I want you to be good, Bobby," said Laura, yet smiling at the younger girl. "Show them there is something in you besides mischief. The teachers have a wrong idea of you. You want to change all that."

"Gee! I couldn't be a Miss Nancy," chuckled the other.

"Just see how you are cut out of all our good times," warned Laura. "And we need you in athletics, Bobby! Our eight-oared shell will be without its cox—and we hoped to have a boat of our own this season. You see, Bobby, one girl can't do wrong without hurting the rest of us. 'All for one and one for all' is the motto of Central High, you know."

"Oh, dear, Laura, I *didn't* set that fire," cried Bobby, suddenly, and almost in tears.

"I don't believe for a minute that you did," returned her friend. "But you might use your superabundance of wit in finding out who did set it. I've racked my brains, I am sure, and I can't see the answer."

"Then, how do you expect me to do so—and

you always so ingenious?" complained Bobby.

Laura's ingenuity about the kite and the steeple-jack delighted most of the girls who were with her on that Saturday afternoon tramp. And when they knew she intended giving the gold eagle presented to her by Colonel Swayne to the treasury of the Girls' Branch they cheered her—all but Hester and Lily.

The explanation of the fire in Mr. Sharp's office eluded Laura, however, as it did everybody else. But she gave considerable thought to the problem as the days passed.

The Athletic Field was being put in shape as rapidly as possible. Already the high board fence was being erected and a large shed with lockers for the girls. As the field joined their old bathing pavilion there were shower and plunge baths already at hand. Mrs. Case promised the school that, other things being well, the girls should have an exhibition field day for parents and friends before many weeks. The indoor exercises were practiced assiduously, and most of the advanced classes, at least, tried to stand well in these so as to take part in the outdoor games.

With the regular school work, the physical instruction, and the after-hour athletics, the girls of Central High found their time filled. But

Laura Belding and her close friends had the added excitement and interest of the coming M. O. R. initiation.

A full week elapsed from the Day of the Touch to the hour when the candidates were to be made full members of the secret society. This initiation was usually a novel affair, and on this occasion it was announced to the candidates that Robinson's Woods was the scene and Saturday at four o'clock the time of the exercises. Secrecy was maintained—or should have been. No one but members of the M. O. R., or the candidates, was to know the time and place; but events which followed showed that there was a "leak" somewhere.

Robinson's Woods was a fine picnicking ground, back among the hills. One of the Market Street cars passed a road which led to the grove; one needed to walk but half a mile, and through a pleasant byway. But once at the Woods, it was as though the primeval forest surrounded the place.

There was a small hotel, tables and benches in the open, swings and a carrousel, and a dancing pavilion. But the M. O. R.'s did not propose to hold their exercises in so exposed a place. Up from the regular grounds devoted to entertainment led a narrow, rocky path through the

thicker wood. The goal to which this path led was a high, open plateau in the midst of the forest, from which one could overlook a winding country road and a more winding, tumbling, noisy brook which came down from the heights.

Two special cars awaited the M. O. R. girls and the candidates for initiation, and it was a merry party that debarked at the head of the wood road. They marched straight away from the regular picnic grounds and were soon on the plateau.

The sun was going down and the view over the valley, in which lay the City of Centerport, was beautiful indeed. There were nearly a hundred girls, and in their bright dresses they made a very pretty picture in the open space in the forest.

They were far from human habitation. Indeed there was no house in sight, save an abandoned farmhouse at the upper end of the clearing. Surrounded by a straggling fence, with a gate hanging from one hinge, and the out-houses behind it fallen in ruins, this old dwelling presented a rather ghostly appearance. It did, indeed, go by the name of "Robison's Haunted House"; but in the late afternoon sunlight none of the visitors thought of the grewsome stories told of it.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

EVERY girl had brought a box of luncheon, and besides, somebody had "toted" two huge pots for chocolate and the little individual cups they all carried made sufficient drinking vessels. Mary O'Rourke, with the help of Laura and another girl who knew something about wood-lore, built a camp-fire, while two other girls climbed down to the road and followed it across the brook on the stepping-stones and up the hill to the nearest farmhouse for milk. There was a spring of clear water in the hillside at the edge of the plateau.

The red sun dropped behind the forest-clad hills upon the distant shore of Lake Luna. They could see the rippling water sparkle in the last rays of the sun. A white sail was set in this background of red and purple glory, like a single, flashing diamond. The birds were winging homeward to their nests in the hills behind the girls' camp.

"What a quiet, soothing picture," sighed one of the seniors.

"It might be altogether too quiet up here after dark if there weren't such a bunch of us," said Josephine Morse. "Ugh!"

"The haunted house, eh?" suggested Laura.

"Don't say a word! I bet there *are* ghosts in it," declared another girl, with a shiver.

"I'll guarantee there are rats in it," laughed Laura.

"You're so brave!" exclaimed Jess, with scorn. "But you wouldn't want to go into that house even in the daytime."

"I don't like rats," admitted her chum.

"That's all right," put in Celia Prime. "But there really is a ghost connected with the old Robinson house."

"There always is," laughed Laura.

"Mary will tell you about it," said the senior, gravely. "You have been brought here for that purpose, you candidates. Wait until after supper."

"Oh!" squealed one of the Lockwood twins. "A real ghost story?"

"Just as real as any ghost story possibly can be," said Mary O'Rourke, laughing. "Gather around the fire, you infants. Never mind the smoke—it will keep away the mosquitoes. Here

come Jennie and Belle with the milk, and we can make the chocolate. The table is spread—and we've got to hurry so as to get our share away from the black ants."

"Oh—o! Don't!" begged somebody. "Don't remind us of them. I feel them crawling all over me *now!*"

"To say nothing of the spiders," laughed the wicked Mary.

"Oo—h! That's the only trouble with picnics. Somebody ought to go ahead and sweep off the grass," declared Dorothy Lockwood.

"That would surely be 'adorning nature'—'painting the lily'—and all that," laughed Mary.

The shadows were creeping up from the valley. The electric lights flashed out all over the city and made a brilliant spectacle below them. The night wind rustled the trees and the whip-poor-will began his complaint from his pitch upon a dead branch.

A bell began to toll at intervals from somewhere far up the hillside. Some wandering cow wore this bell, but it sounded ghostly.

"Listen!" commanded Mary O'Rourke, standing beyond the fire where she could be seen and heard by all the candidates, at least, who were grouped in one place. "And especially you infants who this night appear before our solemn

body for initiation into its ancient rites and mysteries. Listen!

"Before it grew dark we could all see right down there beyond the fording place in the brook, where the road crosses a ploughed field on the other side. Not a year ago, this farmer from whom Bell bought the milk, Mr. Sitz, was driving home just on the edge of the evening, with his son and his father-in-law, in a spring wagon. He drove a pair of young horses, and was giving them particular attention, so he says. But as they came up the hill toward the brook he saw a light moving down the road between them.

"In his opinion it was a lantern under a carriage. He saw the light flash back and forth, low above the ground, as though a horse's legs were between the lantern and those approaching it.

"'Here comes a carriage, Dad,' said his son.

"'It's a top-buggy, Israel,' declared the old gentleman on the other side of Mr. Sitz.

"The young horses sprang forward nervously as they reached the ford. The wagon splashed through the brook and out upon the hard road. The horses had crowded over to the left hand, and Mr. Sitz knew that he was not giving the coming carriage sufficient room to pass.

"But as he pulled his team back to the right

hand side of the road he glanced ahead again and saw that the light had disappeared. Black as the night was he was confident there was no vehicle there—where he had expected to see one.

"'What's come o' that carriage, Father?' he asked the old man.

"'Why—why it went by, didn't it?' returned his father-in-law.

"'I didn't see it,' declared the son.

"'It did not pass us on the high side,' Mr. Sitz declared.

"'Must have turned into the ploughed field,' suggested the boy again.

"Mr. Sitz stopped his horses and gave the lines to his son to hold. He climbed down with his own lantern and searched for wheel tracks in the field beside the road. He was positive no vehicle had passed his wagon on the right hand side of the road. He could find no marks of the wheels anywhere in the soft ground. But as he turned back to climb into his wagon again he saw a light flash up for an instant in the windows of that front room yonder—in the haunted house," said Mary, with emphasis and pointing dramatically.

"Mr. Sitz will tell you about it, if you ask him. He will also tell you what the mysterious carriage and the mysterious light in the haunted house meant."

"Oh, dear!" murmured Jess in Laura's ear. "Doesn't she make you feel creepy?"

"Not yet," whispered Laura. "Lots of people have seen intermittent lights on marshy ground, and the flare of light in the window of the old house was the reflection of his own lantern, perhaps."

"Silence!" commanded Mary, sternly. "No comments. Besides, those who try to explain ghost stories have a thankless job on their hands," and she laughed. "We all are like the old woman who declared she didn't believe in ghosts, but she was awfully afraid of them!

"This is the weird tale: Years ago an old man named Robinson and his unmarried sister lived in that house. They were the last of their family, and both were miserly. For that reason they had never married, for fear the other would get the larger share of the property here on the side of the mountain. And they had money, too.

"Sarah Robinson," pursued Mary, "was of that breed of misers who delight in handling their gold, and worshipping it. She could not enjoy figures in a bank-book as she enjoyed handling the actual money. But John Robinson was of a more practical turn, and he banked his money as he made it.

"One day a man who had borrowed of John paid him a large sum of money—took up a mort-

gage, in fact. It was wild spring weather and the stream yonder was running full. But although it rained so hard John Robinson would not risk his money in the house over night.

"His sister and he quarreled about it. She said he was a fool to go to town to bank his money on such a day. She would have been glad to sit up all night and watch it—and every night, too. But John harnessed his decrepit mare to his ramshackle buggy, and started for town.

"'You put the lamp in the east window for me when it comes dark, and I'll get back all right,' he told her.

"Sarah scolded all the time until he was gone. She even said she hoped he'd be drowned in the river—he and his money together. Oh! she was quite a savage old creature, they say.

"Along towards evening a dreadful tempest burst up in the hills—a regular cloudburst. A thunderous torrent overflowed the banks of that pretty brook yonder. It became dark and they say old Sarah did not set the lamp in the window as she usually did when John was away from home.

"In the midst of the storm and darkness she must have seen his lantern jogging along the road, under the hind axle of his carriage, just as Mr. Sitz saw it," continued Mary, in a solemn

voice. "But the old woman would not light her lamp. The old man came down to the brook in the pitch darkness, missed the ford, drove into the deeper water below the crossing, and was swept away, horse carriage and all, by the flood!"

"Oh—oh!" was the murmured chorus.

"How awful!" cried one girl.

"What an old witch!" exclaimed Jess Morse.

"But Sarah ran to set her light in the window —when it was too late," pursued Mary, the story teller. "And every night for years thereafter, while she lived along here in the old house, Sarah Robinson put her lamp in the window just after dark. And they say *she often puts it in the window now!* But usually the ghost light is preceded by the light and carriage on the road beyond the ford."

"I declare! I thought I saw a light flare up in the old house just then!" cried one of the girls on the outskirts of the sitting crowd of listeners.

"Very likely," returned Mary O'Rourke, in a sepulchral voice; "for it is on a night like this that the ghost of Sarah Robinson is supposed to walk."

CHAPTER XIV

THE TEST

THE end of Mary's story seemed to be a signal awaited by the M. O. R.'s, for they all began to rise now and quickly surrounded the little group of candidates for initiation. Some of these girls started to rise, too, but Mary commanded:

"Wait! Candidates for the honors and the secrets of the M. O. R.'s must show both bravery and obedience. The hour has arrived for those candidates who desire to enter into the confidence and trust of the older members of the society, to show such desire. Obedience and courage are our watch words to-night. Those of the candidates who desire to go back—who dare not submit to The Test—may now make final decision. But she who puts her hand to the plough may not turn back after this decision."

"Well, I'm going to stick it out, ploughing and all!" giggled Jess in her chum's ear.

None of the candidates expressed a desire to back out in the silence that ensued, although the

mournful bell tinkled on the hillside and now a "booby" owl added its mournful complaint to the note of the whip-poor-will.

"We are ready for the test, then," said Mary, still solemnly. "Let the ballot-box be brought. In it have been placed the names of the candidates, each on a separate slip of paper. They will be drawn in quartettes, and each quartette will be given a task which will require both courage and obedience."

There was a little rustle among the girls as one of them brought forward one of the lunch boxes.

"The first test," said Mary O'Rourke, "will be for the first four candidates drawn to take each three nails and this hammer and go together to the haunted house, enter by the front door, go into the east front room where Old Sarah is wont to show her light, and drive the nails, one after another, in the floor of the room."

"O—o—oh!" moaned the candidates, in a horrified chorus.

"Silence, infants!" commanded the president of the M. O. R.'s. "Each girl must drive her own three nails. There must be no balking. The nails will be examined—er—later—by daylight—to make sure that the test has been honestly performed I will now draw the slips and announce the names of the first quartette."

"How dreadful!" whispered one of the Lockwood twins. "I'll faint if I have to do that."

"Dora Lockwood," announced Mary the next instant.

"Oh!" squealed the twin named; but nobody save the twins themselves knew which one spoke.

"Josephine Morse."

Jess grabbed Laura by the arm. "I—I'm scared to death!" she whispered in her chum's ear.

"Helen Agnew."

The doctor's daughter grabbed Jess. "We've got to do it!" she murmured. "Isn't it awful?"

"Laura Belding."

"Goody!" exclaimed Jess, aloud. "You've got to go, too, Laura."

"The four candidates named will step forward and receive the nails and the hammer," said Mary, sternly; but a good many of the older girls were laughing.

It was no laughing matter to the candidates in question, however. Only three approached the president at first.

"Miss Lockwood!" commanded Mary.

"Which one?" giggled somebody in the background.

"Miss Dora Lockwood!"

"Both of them are 'Dorothy' now," said Celia Prime. "This is one time when either is willing that the other should take her place. They declare that on Touch Day Dora was touched twice, once for herself and once for her sister."

"Then Dora is doubly called now," said Mary O'Rourke, sternly.

One of the twins pushed the other forward suddenly.

"Oh!" cried the girl pushed. "I'm not Dora!"

"The right one had better come," cried Mary. "The next Test may be a good deal worse than *this* one."

"Oh, then I'll take it!" cried the Lockwood twin who had been pushed.

"No, you don't, Miss!" exclaimed her sister, elbowing her way to the front. "*I'm* Dora."

"Well," said Mary, "if I shut my eyes and you girls changed places I couldn't tell you apart. I wish one of you had a different dimple in her cheek—or even a mole——"

"O—oh! How horrid!" chorused the Lockwoods.

"Then the right one must come forward. As Gee Gee says: 'On your honor, young ladies!'"

The twins finally decided to own up to their

rightful names, and Dora joined the other three candidates and accepted the three nails. To Laura was given the hammer.

"Remember what you have been told. Each must drive her own nails. And mark well where you drive them, for they will be examined—by daylight," finished Mary, with a chuckle.

The crowd of girls parted and left an open lane for the four candidates to pass through. The owl hooted again and the cowbell tinkled upon the hillside. The quartette started on their mission slowly. It was very dark about the haunted house, for big trees overshadowed it.

"I'm scared clear down to the soles of my feet," whispered Jess to Laura.

"Never mind. Don't let the rest of them know it," was her chum's reply.

They came to the ruined gate and pushed it open. The path was weed-grown, and as they rustled through, keeping close together, the owl hooted again—right over their heads.

"Ouch!" screamed Nellie Agnew.

A chorus of giggles answered from the crowd in the rear. But her companions saw nothing to laugh at. The owl had startled all four.

"Oh, dear!" whispered Dora. "Let's go back."

"We can't!" hissed Jess.

Laura marched straight on to the step of the porch. The boards creaked under her feet as she mounted to the door. The door hung from one hinge and when she pushed upon it, it creaked frightfully.

"Oh!" squealed Nellie again.

"Do come on!" muttered Jess. "I'm just as scared as you are; but don't let those girls know how bad we feel. They're just enjoying themselves."

"And of course there's nothing, or nobody, here," Laura added. "They are just having fun with us. Even if something does startle us in this old house, it will be nothing worse than rats."

"But I don't like ra—rats," wailed Dora, under her breath.

"Does anybody?" snapped Jess. "Come on!'

They entered the house, Laura leading. The door of the east room was open and some light entered through the broken windows—light enough to show them the way. Laura stepped carefully over the floor, fearing that some broken board might trip them.

But once in the big, empty, musty room, there seemed nothing to bother them. Even the owl had flown away.

"Now we'll drive the nails as quickly as pos-

sible and get out again," said Laura in a low, but perfectly even, tone.

She stooped and fumbled her first nail for a moment. Then she smote the head of it a sharp blow with the hammer.

On the heels of that sound came a scream from Nellie.

"Look! Oh, look!" she shrieked.

She was standing erect, pointing through the east window.

"The light! The ghost light!" cried Jess.

Laura raised up a little and saw a light, dancing close to the ground, and on the other side of the brook. It was just about where a lantern under a carriage would have been.

"Come away!" gasped Jess, and she turned and ran. Nell and Dora ran with her. And it must be confessed that Laura was heartily frightened herself, and their panic was communicated to her.

She scrambled to her feet and tried to run. But something seized her skirt and dragged her back to the floor!

Laura screamed aloud then, herself. She tried to get up once more, but the ghostly hand again tugged at her garments and dragged her back upon the floor of the haunted house.

CHAPTER XV

A VERY REAL GHOST INDEED

For a moment or two Laura Belding held to some shreds of courage. Of course she did not believe in ghosts! It was no supernatural thing that had either apeared as light to them, or had attacked her.

Yet when she essayed a third attempt to rise, she was cast to the floor once more, seemingly by the same strong hand, and this time she turned her ankle sharply. Her terror and pain made her cry out, and she lay there for a moment, helpless, watching the moving reflection of the ghostly lantern on the wall!

Suddenly between her and this reflected light, appeared a figure in white. It seemed immensely tall. It glided out of the shadowy portion of the room and came toward her.

The figure of old Sarah Robinson!

Outside the running girls shrieked appallingly. And their cries were re-echoed by the larger number of their schoolmates down by the campfire.

Laura closed her eyes for a moment. Consciousness left her.

The white-clad figure moved nearer. It stooped above the prostrate girl. With swift hands it tied Laura's hands together before her tightly. Then a thick veil, doubled many times, was passed across the helpless girl's mouth and tied tightly so that her voice would be muffled should she attempt to cry out.

It took less than a minute for this very palpable ghost to do this. Then, as silently as it had appeared, it glided away and, a moment later, a door might have been heard to bang at the back of the old house.

But the girls without had been so terrified that none of them heard this sound. The bobbing lantern light across the brook had been seen by those around the campfire as well as by the girls who had entered the haunted house. Mary O'Rourke's story had made a strong impression upon the minds of them all. Mary herself was startled by the appearance of the light.

Besides, panic is catching. And the three girls who ran from the house were certainly panic-stricken. Their screams of horror started many of the other girls off, and some of the waiting ones turned and ran from the plateau and down the steep path before Jess, and Dora, and Nellie reached the fire.

"The ghost! the ghost! It's after us!" shrieked the doctor's daughter, and kept right on, following the girls who had already decamped.

It was useless for any of the braver ones to try to stop the stampede. Nobody wanted to remain in the vicinity of the haunted house. They had all seen enough.

An early rising moon cast a ghostly light on the path through the wood, and the girls' feet fairly flew over this way. Celia Prime and Mary O'Rourke were among the last to run; but they did run finally, and never had a hundred or more girls become so entirely panic-stricken as the members of the M. O. R.'s and their candidates for initiation. The ceremony was there and then, and without a dissenting voice, postponed to a more favorable time!

"Where is Laura?" gasped Jess, running hard behind the Lockwood twins.

"Oh, yes! she's so brave!" panted Dora. "She ran first of all, I believe. I bet she's 'way ahead of us."

Jess knew that Laura could outrun most of the girls, whether they were frightened or not. So she took this statement for the truth.

But when they arrived at the inn and the regular picnic grounds, Laura was not there. But some of the girls who had started first had al-

ready passed through the gates and were on the road to the cars.

Of course, most of them had stopped running now. They were ashamed of their fright, and did not want to explain it to the people at the inn. But you couldn't have hired one of them to return to the plateau before the haunted house just then.

"I think Laura is just too mean not to wait for us," panted Nellie Agnew.

"She's ashamed, I expect," said one of the twins.

"It isn't like her," Jess said.

"She was scared, all right," said Nellie.

"Well! who wouldn't be?" demanded Jess.

They went on to the car tracks at a slower pace. Some of the first girls to arrive, however, had not waited for the two special cars that stood upon the side track, but took a regular one back to town.

"I believe I saw Hester Grimes get aboard that car that just passed," said one of the twins. "I wonder what she was doing out here?"

"Lots of people ride out this way in the evening," returned another girl. "I suppose Hessie has a right to come, too."

"Wish she'd been up there in that house to get scared." muttered Jess.

"And Laura seems to have taken a car back to town, likewise," said Nellie.

Laura's absence began to trouble Jess. She searched among the other girls, but could get no word of her chum.

"She beat us," laughed Mary O'Rourke, when Jess approached her with the question. "She's gone home."

There was a deal of bustle and laughter as the girls climbed into the special cars. They had recovered from their fright now, and some laughed at it. But not a girl could say what the light was they had seen bobbing over the ground. And the three who had been in the house were half tempted to believe that they had seen something supernatural in that uncanny east room.

"At any rate, I *felt* there was something there the moment I went in," declared Nellie.

"It was an awfully spooky place," agreed Dora.

"And it smelled—just like a tomb," said Jess.

"I wouldn't go into the house again for a farm!" declared Nellie.

"Not after dark, at any rate," Jess said, more bravely.

"Never again—dark or light," declared Dora. "And I guess the seniors and juniors were

scared just as much as we were. They can't laugh at us."

"My! I hope the rest of the initiation won't be as bad as this," said Nellie.

"If it is, I'll want to renig," said Dora. "It costs too much to be an M. O. R."

"We certainly are a brave lot of 'Mothers of the Republic,'" laughed Mary, who heard the sophomores conversing.

"That's all right!" spoke up Jess. "But you didn't go into that house yourself."

"Quite true. It wasn't my place. I was only sending you infants there," returned Mary.

But when the girls all left the cars on Market Street and Jess finally separated from the others at the corner of Whiffle Street, she began to worry about Laura again. It seemed strange that her chum should have run right home.

There was the Belding house ahead. There were figures on the porch. Jess halted at the gate.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Chet Belding. "Where's Laura, Jess?"

He and Lance came down the walk hastily. Jess leaned weakly on the gate, smitten now with the fear that something must have happened to her chum.

"Isn't she here, Chet?" she asked.

"Of course not."

"Didn't she come home with you?" demanded Lance, hastily.

"No. Oh, oh! Something dreadful has happened. Tell me honest, boys—isn't she here?"

"No, she's not," they both assured her, and Chet opened the gate.

"Tell us what's happened," he said. "But speak low. Mother's gone to bed with a headache and father's gone to the lodge. Why! Jess! you're crying!"

And Jess *was* sobbing nervously. She could not help it. Her fear for Laura's safety had taken form now, and for a minute she could not answer the boys' excited question at all.

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE IS LAURA?

LAUNCELOT DARBY was rather impatient with Jess Morse. He would have shaken her had not Chet interfered.

"Hold on! hold on!" said Laura's brother, yet quite as anxious as his chum. "You tell us your own way, Jess. But *do* hurry. We're dreadfully anxious."

"I—I mean to tell you," sobbed Jess. "Something dreadful has happened—and I ran away and left her."

"Ran away and left who—Laura?" gasped Lance.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Up in Robinson's Woods."

"At the picnic place?"

"No."

"Back in the woods, then?" demanded Chet.

"Up on the side of the mountain. You—you know that—that old house——"

"The haunted house!" exclaimed Lance.

"The old Robinson house?" cried Chet.

"Yes."

"What under the sun were you doing there?"

"I—I can't tell you. It—it was something about the initiation——"

"Those blessed Mary O'Rourkes!" cried Lance, smiting his hands together.

"The M. O. R.'s," said Chet. "You girls were all up there?"

"Ye—es."

"In the dark?"

"We had a campfire."

"And what happened?"

"Well, Laura and two other girls and I had to go into the house."

"That old wreck!" ejaculated Lance again.

"Ye—es."

"Weren't you afraid?" demanded Chet.

"That—that's the trouble. We were frightened."

"Somebody played a trick on you," declared Chet.

"No, they didn't!" gasped Jess. "It was a real ghost."

At that both boys chuckled, and Chet said:

"Aw, say, now, Jess. How could there be a *real* ghost?"

"Never mind. That's not the point," Lance interposed, eagerly. "We want to know what's become of Laura."

"So we do," admitted Chet.

"Was she scared, too?" asked Lance.

"Of course she was. *You'd* have been——"

"Wouldn't either!" snapped Lance. "No ghost would ever scare me. Some of the other girls played a trick on you."

"Of course, that's it," said Chet. "But that don't explain why Laura——"

"That's it!" interrupted Lance. "Tell us where she is."

"She must be there," declared Jess, in an awe-struck voice.

"Where?"

"In the house."

"In Robinson's old house?" gasped Chet.

"That's where we left her. I thought she got out ahead of us. But she didn't."

"And none of you were brave enough to go back and look for her?" demanded Lance, with scorn.

"We thought she was ahead. All the girls ran——"

"What made you run?" asked Chet, trying to soothe her.

"The light."

"You saw a ghost light, eh?" demanded Chet. "I bet you'd been hearing that old story they tell about the Robinsons."

Jess nodded.

"And the ghost lantern appeared?"

"Yes. It *did*. It was really there, Chetwood."

"All right. I didn't think Laura would fall for a thing like that," scoffed the absent girl's brother.

"Say!" demanded Lance, who admired Laura greatly and would not let even her brother laugh at her. "All those other girls ran, didn't they? Jess ran. Why should Laura be any braver than the rest of the bunch?"

"Well! she ought to be," grunted her brother. Then he turned again to Jess, who was fast recovering her composure now. "And you didn't see Laura leave the house after your scare?"

"No."

"How many of you girls were in the house?"

"Only four of us."

"And three got away?"

"Yes."

"Supposedly, then, the ghost got Laura?"

"She didn't come out, Chet. You needn't laugh. Something bad has happened to her."

"Of course, if you are sure she didn't come out of the house——"

"Just as sure as I stand here!" declared the girl, emphatically. "I didn't think so until just now. It seemed as though she must have run ahead and taken one of the regular cars to town. But now I know that wouldn't have been Laura's way, whether she was scared or not."

"I should say not," said Lance, in disgust. "You girls are all alike—all but Laura! *She* wouldn't have left you in such a mess."

"Now, stop that!" commanded Chet. "Such talk won't lead to anything but angry feelings. Jess thought Laura was ahead. Now we'll go back and find her."

"Oh, Chet! if you only would," begged Jess, too miserable to even be offended at Lance.

"We'll get out the car. Father won't mind. And I got my license to run it only last month."

"Bully!" ejaculated Lance.

"I'm going, too," said Jess, wiping her eyes vigorously.

"Had you better?" returned Chet, doubtfully. "You're all strung up yourself over this, you know."

"I won't cry any more, Chet—don't you fear," declared the girl. "Let me go."

"Just as you say, only I thought you wouldn't go back to that house again."

"I'll go with you boys."

"Ghosts and all?"

"If it's a ghost it's gone by now."

"All right," said Chet. "But it's half after nine already. What will your mother say?"

"She's at the Academic Club, and won't be home for ever so long," declared Jess. "Let me go with you to the garage."

She followed the two boys to the rear of the Belding premises. Chet unlocked and slid back the garage doors. The touring car which his father owned was ready at a moment's notice to be taken out. They kept no chauffeur, for both Mr. Belding and Chet could manage the machine, and had she been old enough to take out a license Laura could herself have spun the car over the roads about Centerport.

"Hop in, Jess," said Chet, kindly. "That is, if you are sure you won't be frightened. I'm going to drive her some."

"I'm never scared when you are driving, Chet," returned the girl.

"I guess I'll get you to the inn at the picnic grounds in safety, at least," and the boy laughed. "You can wait there for us."

"No!" cried Jess.

"No?"

"I'm not going to be left there to watch the car while you boys hunt for Laura."

"But we may have to get a party of neighbors there and beat up the woods."

"But I believe now she was left behind in the old house," declared Jess.

"Not likely," said Lance. "She ran out some other door. Got turned around in those woods. That's what happened."

"You may be right," Jess admitted. "But I have a feeling that it isn't so. Something happened to Laura right there in the haunted house."

"You feel that way because you were so frightened there yourself," said Chet.

"I don't know why I feel so; but it is a fact," said Jess, confidently.

"Come on!" cried Lance, who was already in the front seat.

Chet helped Jess into the tonneau and closed the door. Then he hopped in beside Lance, tried his various levers, and started the car. It slid quietly out of the garage and they left the door open. The big car began to purr almost at once, and running smoothly, soon left the hill section and raced out along Market Street, now quiet save for the electric cars and other automobiles at this hour of the evening.

It was not long after ten when the car turned

into the quiet road, with its few electric lights, leading to Robinson's Woods. There were a few other cars at the inn, and some people on the porch. Chet went at once to the manager and told him of the absence of his sister.

"I saw those girls all going to the car; but they never said anything about one of their number being lost," said the gentleman.

"They didn't know it then. They don't all know it now, in fact. But when Laura didn't come home her chum was sure that she was left behind. And she thinks she is in the old house up yonder," explained Chet.

"In the haunted house?"

"Yes."

"Nice place for girls to go!" exclaimed the man. "What did they want to go into that old ruin for?"

"Well, that isn't just the point," said Chet. "I'd like to get all the men you can raise to help us beat up the woods. She *may* have wandered into the wood at the back of the house——"

"But she'd know she was going the wrong way then, wouldn't she?" returned the manager of the hotel. "For it's uphill, you know."

"I suppose that's so," said Chet. "But something has happened to her and we're worried."

"Don't blame you. I'll go with you myself.

And there are some other men here who will accompany us," said the manager, and he bustled away.

In five minutes the party was ready, with lanterns and clubs—though why the clubs, Chet could not imagine. Ghosts were not to be laid with such carnal weapons!

Jess insisted upon going along. "I left her alone, and I am ashamed," she told Chet. "I want to hunt for Laura, too."

She and Chet walked straight up the path to the plateau, Chet carrying one of the car lanterns. The others, including Lance, beat up through the wood, halloaing to each other, and shouting Laura's name. The lost girl's brother and her chum came first to the haunted house, however.

"If you're afraid to go in you stay here," advised Chet, when they came to the place.

"I'm not afraid to go anywhere with you, Chet," declared the girl, warmly.

That made Chet feel even more bold than before. He started right up the steps, with Jess clinging slily to his coat-tail.

They entered the house. The lamp light was flashed into the east room. It was empty!

Not quite empty, after all. On the floor was a three-cornered bit of cloth—a piece of Laura's skirt—nailed to the boards.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MYSTERY

AND where was Laura herself all this time?

She had returned to consciousness almost at once. Indeed, the pulling of the bonds upon her wrists and the veil tied so tightly across the lower part of her face would naturally have aroused her.

But for a moment she could neither rise nor move. It seemed as though she was paralyzed. Her ankle began to pain, then, and at the first throb the girl came fully to her senses.

"Oh! where am I?" she thought.

But she couldn't have spoken the words aloud. The muffler was too tight across her lips.

The ghostly figure that had flitted out of the room had scarcely gone when Laura opened her eyes. The frightened girl looked all around for it. She remembered how awful it had looked. But nothing was in sight—nothing but the wavering reflection of the ghost-light on the wall.

To her ears, however, came the screaming of the frightened girls on the plateau before the

house. It was not alone her three comrades screaming; but the chorus of the whole party of M. O. R.'s who had given voice to their terror. And the sounds were swiftly receding The girls were leaving her alone, bound and helpless, in this awful house!

Never for a moment did Laura Belding believe that the thing was a trick, or joke. It could not be part of the M. O. R. initiation. Mary O'Rourke and Celia Prime and the other seniors governing the secret society were not the girls to make up any such plan as this with which to frighten new members of the order. Nor would the school authorities allow such action by the M. O. R.'s.

Nevertheless, Laura knew that something strange had happened to her. There had been no person in this big room when she and her three friends had entered to drive the nails. Yet, when the fright occurred and she had attempted to run, she was hauled back by the skirt.

Something seemed to have grabbed her. Was it a hand—the same hand that had lashed her wrists and gagged her with this veil?

Yet, any person beside the four girls would have betrayed his presence—for the room had never been wholly dark—only in the far corners. And no arm would be long enough to reach out of those shadows and seize the bottom

of Laura's skirt and pull her to the floor again when she started to run.

The girl was still frightened — desperately frightened, indeed. But the possibility of anything supernatural having happened to her had long since departed from her mind. Even the flickering reflection of the ghost-light did not trouble her.

No ghost could have bound her hands and gagged her.

The voices of the girls had died away into the distance ere this. With a groan of pain because of her ankle, Laura rolled over and tried again to rise. Something jerked her back!

She threw herself over and rolled away from the point of contact. There was a tearing sound —and she was free!

She scrambled to her feet. Then she saw what manner of "ghostly hand" had held her. In stooping to drive the first nail into the floor, she had driven it through the hem of her skirt—that was what had jerked her to the floor when she tried to run with her comrades.

"Well! I am silly!" mumbled the girl.

Instantly she heard somebody cry out, but outside of the house.

"What's the matter mit you, Otto?" growled a deeper voice.

"I heard a voice, fader! Not nearer to dat

house would I go—so hellup me! It iss de ha'nt!"

Laura's muffled voice was audible a few yards away, but she could not tell them who she was, and how situated. She ran to the window. One sash was gone. Boys had used the windows as targets in times past.

"Ouch!" yelled the younger voice, in a long-drawn wail. "Dere iss oldt Sarah!"

"Be still! you are a fool!" commanded the gruffer voice.

Laura saw that a man and a boy were outside the fence. The man carried a lantern. It had been this light coming along the road that had so terrified the M. O. R.'s and the candidates for initiation.

The farmer raised his lantern so that the light fell full upon the face of the girl in the house. He saw the veil-bandage, and her tied wrists. In a moment he hopped over the broken-down fence and hurried to the casement.

"Come here, Otto!" he commanded. "See your ghost—fool! It is a harmless girl—and she is in trouble. What does this mean, eh?" he asked, in his queer English. "Somebody been fooling you, no?"

Then seeing that Laura could not answer him save by a murmur from behind the muffler, the farmer said:

"Run in there undt untie her, Otto! Do you hear?"

"But the ghost, fader!" gasped the fat boy, who had followed his parent to the house, and seemed much the more cowardly of the two.

"Bah! Ghost indeed! There iss no ghost here——"

"But we know de house iss haunted. Are you sure dat iss not old Sarah?" demanded Otto, in much fear.

"It is a girl—a *madchen*—I tell you! A mere child—yes!" cried the father. "Go in there and unloose her hands—dolt!" and he boxed his son's ear soundly.

"Oh! I can come out myself!" Laura tried to say.

She darted away from the window, found the open door, and so staggered out of the house to meet the farmer and his half-grown boy, with the lantern, on the porch of the haunted dwelling.

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed the man. "We heardt de oder girls screeching—yah? Undt dey tie you undt leave you here?"

He was fumbling with the knotted veil as he spoke, having passed the lantern to Otto, and now unfastened it so that Laura could reply.

"No, no!" she said. "Something frightened

us all. First your lantern coming along the road. We thought it was the ghost light."

"Ouch!" wailed Otto again. He was very much afraid of the ghost.

"And then—I nailed my skirt to the floor and could not get away quickly. I—I am afraid I have been a dreadful fool," admitted Laura, with some chagrin.

"But you did not tie yourself—so," growled the farmer, working on her wrist bonds.

"No. I fell and something—*somebody,* I should say—came and tied my wrists and put that veil over my face—give me the veil, please."

"Some of your companions play a choke onto you—eh?" said the farmer.

"No. They would not be so cruel. And they were all as badly frightened by your lantern as I was."

"Den you haf an enemy—eh?" queried the man.

"I do not know who. I don't know what it means. Oh!"

"You are hurt, Miss?"

"I can scarcely hobble on my foot. I turned my ankle," explained Laura.

"Then Otto and I will help you home—to our house yet," said the farmer. "We were hunting a stray cow. My name iss Sitz. I lif' back up

de road—yonder. Two of your girls friendts bought milk at my house to-night."

"Yes. I know who you are," admitted Laura. "Do you suppose you could get me to your house and then send word to the city so that my father or brother will get it — without frightening mother?"

"Ach!" ejaculated the farmer. "We can carry you—Otto undt me; if he *iss* a fool-boy, he iss strong. Undt we haf de telephone. Sure we can carry you."

They made a "chair" with their four hands, in which Laura sat, leaning back against their arms, and so maintaining her balance. She carried the lantern to light the way, and very soon after her girl friends had left the plateau in their stampede, she was being carried across the brook and up the country road to the Sitz farmhouse.

Laura had recovered from her fright ere this; but the mystery of what had happened to her continued to puzzle and amaze her.

Who had done this to her? What had been the object of the attack? And why should anybody desire to so maltreat and frighten her? These questions were repeated over and over in her mind, even while she was talking with Mr. Sitz and Otto. And there seemed to be no sane and sensible answer to them!

It surely was not any of the M. O. R.'s who had done this. They had all been just as frightened as they could be by the light of Mr. Sitz's lantern. Of course, Mary's foolish story of the ghost had started the girls off on the stampede when Jess and Nellie and Dora had run from the haunted house.

Laura remembered very vividly what she had seen in the room after her friends had left her. The figure in white had tied her hands and adjusted that veil across her mouth.

Surely, she must have some enemy—some person who really hated her. For nobody else, it seemed to Laura Belding, could have done so cruel a thing. She had no idea who this enemy could be, however.

Nevertheless, she had stuffed the veil into the front of her blouse and intended to hold on to it. That veil might prove to be a clue to the identity of the person who had bound and gagged her.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE EVE OF THE CONTEST

So, thus carried kindly by the Swiss farmer and his son, Laura Belding came to the farm-house on the hillside. It was a comfortable home, with a big tile stove in the sitting room, and shining china arranged in long rows on high shelves all around the kitchen. The Sitzes had kept up many of their old-world customs and made a comfortable living upon a rocky and hilly farm on which most Americans would have starved to death.

Mrs. Sitz was a comfortable looking, kindly woman, by her expression of countenance; but she spoke little English. There was a girl about Laura's age, however, named Evangeline. She was a buxom, flaxen-haired, rosy girl, who was delighted to see the strange girl whom her father had found in the haunted house.

Evangeline took Laura into her own room, removed her shoe and stocking, and bathed the twisted ankle in cold water, and then insisted

upon rubbing home-made liniment upon it, and bandaging the member tightly. All the time she was doing this, she was exclaiming "Oh!" and "Ah!" over Laura's adventure as the latter related it.

"I think it was real mean of those other girls to run and leave you," said Evangeline, sympathetically.

"I don't think it mean," laughed Laura—for she could laugh now that the advanture had ended so happily. "There were so many of them that I was not missed, I suppose, in the general stampede."

"But you might have remained there all night."

"No! And that reminds me, your father says you have a telephone. I must call up my father, or brother. And yet—I wonder if I won't scare mother by calling at this time of night? Let me think."

"You can use the telephone if you want to," said Evangeline, hospitably. "It's right here in the corner of the living room."

But Laura had a bright idea about the telephoning. She knew that, by this time, the girls must have arrived home. She did not believe Jess would go right past her house without making inquiries for her. And by this time the

household might have been aroused, and her father, or Chet, would be on the way to Robinson's Woods to hunt for her.

So she first called up the hotel at the entrance to the picnic park and told the people there that she was safe, and where she was to be found. She learned that, already, a party of men, and one girl, were out beating the woods for her.

In an hour a motor-car steamed up to the farmhouse door and Chet and Lance, with Jess close behind them, ran into the house.

"Oh, Laura! Laura!" cried her chum, in tears again. "Do forgive me for leaving you to the ghost. And what did it do to you? And how did you get here? And how came your skirt nailed to the floor of that horrid house? And——"

"Dear me! Wait and catch your breath," laughed Laura, kissing her.

"Well, I'm glad you're all right, Sis," said Chet, pretty warmly for a brother, for the big boy was proud of his sister.

Launcelot Darby squeezed Laura's hand tightly, but could say nothing. Lance admired Laura more than any other girl who went to Central High; but he was not able to express his feelings just then.

The farmer and his family—especially Evan-

geline—invited the girl to remain all night and rest her injured ankle. But Laura would not hear of that, although she appreciated their kindness.

"I want Dr. Agnew to see my ankle. Why we've got a basket-ball game on for Friday afternoon, you know, Jess, with East High team—and I can't possibly miss that."

"I'll carry you out myself to the car," declared Lance, gruffly. He suddenly picked her up in his arms (and Laura was no light-weight) and managed to place her in the tonneau very comfortably.

"Come again! Ach! Come again!" cried Mrs. Sitz, from the doorway, bobbing them courtesies as they went down the walk.

Evangeline ran out to the car to kiss Laura good-night, and the latter promised that she would ride over soon and see the farmer's daughter again. But Otto took the boys aside and assured them, with much emphasis, that the Robinson house was actually haunted, and that he wouldn't go into it alone, at night or by day, for his father's whole farm!

"But how did you get nailed to the floor, Laura?" demanded Jess, in the tonneau beside her chum, and when the car was speeding back to town.

"Why! foolish little me did that herself, of course," laughed Laura. "That's what I did when I drove the first nail. Then, when you all ran, squealing, and I tried to do the same, the nail held me and pulled me back. I thought something had grabbed me by the skirt—I really did!" and she laughed again.

But Laura was silent about the rest of her adventure—and none of her young companions chanced to ask her why she had not screamed for help. She hid the veil and determined to wait and watch, hoping to get some clue to the owner of the article. She was sure that the figure she had seen for a moment, and which had, of course, bound her wrists and gagged her with the veil, was one of the girls—somebody who bore her a grudge.

"And who that can be, I don't know—for sure," thought Laura, after she was in bed that night and the throbbing of her ankle and the fever in it kept her awake. "But somebody must really hate me—and hate me hard!—to have played such a trick on me."

It was not that Laura was entirely unsuspicious; but she did not voice the vague thought that ever and anon came to her mind regarding the identity of the person who had so treated her. She did not believe it was any trick that

the members of the M. O. R. were cognizant of; but to make sure she went to Mary O'Rourke that very Monday and asked her point-blank.

Mary had no knowledge of the affair. She deeply regretted that such a misfortune should have overtaken the candidate.

"No more haunted houses for us!" declared the senior. "We'll hold the initiation in the clubhouse—and it will be a tame one, I guess. The girls were all pretty well scared. Of course, we shouldn't have been frightened—especially we older ones; but we *were,* and that's all there is about it."

But the joke on the M. O. R.'s went the rounds of the school. Jess could not keep still about it, and all the members of the secret society were "ragged"—especially by the boys—over being scared by two farmers with a lantern hunting for a strayed cow!

Chet took his sister to and from school for a couple of days in the car and she walked as little as possible meantime; so that the ankle soon recovered its strength. The basket-ball match, which was to come off on the court belonging to East High, was the main topic of conversation among the girls of Central High all that week.

"Just think! they've got a good court, and

we haven't such a thing," commented Josephine Morse to her chum. "I think it is too bad. We need some philanthropist to come here and give us a big prize for our field. When are you going to tackle Colonel Swayne again, Laura?" and she laughed.

"Ah! you don't believe a way to his heart can be opened?" asked her friend, smiling.

"It's a way to his pocket-book I'm speaking about."

"Have patience. I feel that he will be a great help to us——"

"You've got a 'hunch,' then, as Chet says?"

"I expect that is what they call it. But have patience."

Jess was a member of the basket-ball team, as was Laura. And on the team Hester Grimes played. Hester was a strong girl and could play well if she chose; but her temper was so uncertain that Mrs. Case considered it necessary to watch the butcher's daughter very closely.

"And I wish you all to remember," said the physical instructor, the day before the match at East High, "that we must play fair. Play the game for the game's sake—not so much to win. If one desires, above all things, to win, he or she may forget to be perfectly fair. No foul playing. We are going to an opponent's field.

Let us win a name for playing clean basket-ball, whether we win the game or not."

"What's the use of playing if we don't play just as hard as we know how?" demanded Jess.

"Play for all there is in you," agreed Mrs. Case. "I will see that you do not overexert yourselves. But do not lose your tempers. And do not forget to cheer for the opposing team after the game, whether it wins or loses. Be fair, and let the sport be clean."

"Did you watch Hessie while Mrs. Case was talking?" whispered Jess in Laura's ear.

"No."

"She looked so scornful! I hope she won't make us unpopular with the East High girls. But you know how mean she acts sometimes when we play with some of the scrub teams."

"It will be too bad if she makes a scene," said Laura, thoughtfully, "and shames us before our opponents. The girls of Central High will then get a bad name for playing foul—and we can't afford to have *that* reputation."

CHAPTER XIX

HESTER FOULS THE GAME

BASKET-BALL is not an easy game to learn, but it is both a splendid exercise as played under the rules of the Girls' Branch and a game of skill.

Because of the many rules, and sub-divisions of rules, the players must bring to the basket-ball court the quickest intelligence and a serious desire to excel. No laughing or talking is allowed during play. The success of the game is based upon the players giving to it their undivided attention.

It can be played by from five to nine players on a side, and the time of play is usually two halves of fifteen minutes each. Mrs. Case refused to allow her pupils—the girls of Central High—to play more than thirty minutes, and the younger girls could only play the game in three "thirds" of ten minutes each, with five or ten minutes' rest between each two sessions of play.

It was a rule, too, that no girl could play without a physical examination as to her fitness, and the Central High team—the champion team of the school—was selected from among the strongest and best developed girls. This team was now billed to play a similar team selected from among the older girls of the East High of Centerport, and as made up by the physical instructor, was as follows:

Jess Morse, goal keeper
Celia Prime, right forward
Mary O'Rourke, left forward
Hester Grimes, forward center
Laura Belding, jumping center
Lily Pendleton, back center
Bertha Sleigel, right guard
Nellie Agnew, left guard
Roberta Fish, goal guard.

Besides the nine members of each team, the game called for nine other assistants—a referee, two umpires, a scorer, a time keeper, and four linesmen. Because of the possibility of so many foul plays, all these assistants and watchers were necessary. The ordinary "basket-ball five" was hardly known at Central High, as so many girls wanted to play.

On the Friday afternoon the hall in which the

basket-ball court, or ground, of the East High girls was situated, was well filled, in the visitors' part, with the parents and friends of both teams. This was really the first occasion of any athletic trial between the girls of the two schools, although the boys, in their sports, had long since become rivals.

Naturally the girls of Central High were excited over the prospect. Mary O'Rourke, the captain, as well as Mrs. Case, warned the players for the last time in the dressing room to keep cool, play fairly, and to give and take in the game with perfect good-nature.

"Good-nature wins more games than anything else," said Mary. "Just as soon as a girl gets flustered or 'mad' at her opponent, she begins to lose ground—makes mistakes, and fouls the other player, and all that. Remember that the referee and the umpires will be sharp on decisions to-day. 'Didn't know' will be no excuse. And by no means speak to the officials. If you have anything to report, report to me."

"My!" sneered Hester to Lily, "doesn't she think she knows it all? Who told her so much, I'd like to know? I guess there are others here who know the game quite as well as she does."

"But she's captain," said Roberta Fish, one of the juniors.

"And how did she get to be captain? Favoritism, Miss!" snapped Hester.

"Come on, now!" advised Nellie Agnew, good-naturedly. "We don't want to go into the game in this way. We've got to pull together to win. Loyalty, you know!"

"Bah!" said Hester.

"That's what the black sheep said," laughed Nellie. "Don't *you* be the black sheep of Cen-High, Hessie."

The teams were called into the field and the referee put the ball into play in the center. Laura and her opponent jumped for the ball and Laura was fortunate in getting it. During the next few moments, upon signals from their captain, the girls of Central High passed the ball back and forth and suddenly tried for a goal. It was from the field and would have counted two points; but Celia made a fumble, and the ball did not reach the basket, but was stopped by the left forward of the East High team.

The ball was in play immediately, but was in the hands of the home team. When Hester Grimes's opponent got the ball, Hester leaped before her and raised her arms. But she overguarded and instantly the warning whistle sounded from the side lines.

"Foul!" proclaimed the referee.

In a moment the play went on, but again

Hester had a chance at the girl with the ball and once more the whistle blew sharply. Hester was guarding round, with her arms spread and crooked, instead of straight. And to be called down for a foul twice in succession stung Hester Grimes sharply. Her face grew red and her eyes flashed angrily.

"You wait, Miss!" she whispered to the girl who held the ball.

"Silence on the field!" commanded the referee. "Play!"

Hester's fouling put her team-mates out not a little, and the ball was carried to their end of the field and their opponents scored.

"Get together, girls!" commanded Mary, in a low voice. "Don't lose your heads."

But Hester had become thoroughly angry now, for she saw that she would be blamed for the score against her team. She played savagely thereafter, and suddenly one of the home team cried out in pain. Hester had collided roughly with her.

Again the whistle. "I shall ask Captain O'Rourke to take that girl out of the game if there is any further rough play," declared the referee, who was the physical instructor at West High.

The other girls of the Central High team were ashamed. The first half ended with no further

score on the part of the home team; but, on the other hand, the visiting team had been held down to a "goose egg." When the girls went to their dressing room there were some murmurs against Hester's style of playing.

But Mrs. Case stopped this instantly. "If one of our team has shown excitement, we must not blame her too harshly," she said, seriously. "This is our first time playing away from our own field. Be careful. Take time to think, Hester——"

"That referee is unfair. They've given the game to East High, anyway. It was all fixed beforehand," snarled the culprit.

"Listen, Hester," said the teacher, gravely. "That is neither sportsmanlike nor truthful. You must restrain yourself. You are one of the best players we have; but you are fouling the game, and if you do not have a care we shall lose through your fault. Keep your temper. Don't make it necessary for me to remind you again."

This did not soothe Hester's feelings. Mrs. Case had spoken sharply at last, and Hester went back to the field "just boiling inside," as she told her chum.

The second half began. Again Central High was quicker in getting away with the ball. This time they kept it in play among themselves, too,

until a goal was made; but it was from a foul and counted only one point.

Their friends cheered them, however, and as soon as the ball was put into play again the girls of Central High went at it with their old tactics and made splendid runs, finally getting another goal, this time from the field. The visiting team was then ahead in the score.

But the very next minute, when Hester had a chance to get into the game again, she snatched the ball from her opponent's hands. It was so plain a foul that the girls did not need the whistle to cease play. And when the ball came back Hester's team-mates were "rattled" again and East High secured another clean goal.

Indeed, all through the two halves the playing of the East High girls was perfectly clean, while that of Central High was spoiled by Hester. Her rough work was noticeable. Mary O'Rourke tried to keep her out of play as much as possible, and in doing this weakened her side. Before the end of the second half East High scored again, and the score finally stood, when the whistle was blown to cease playing, at seven to three in favor of the home team.

The girls of Central High were both disappointed and chagrined. But they cheered lustily for the winners (all but Hester) and were cheered fairly in return. Yet Laura and her

friends knew that their team had made a bad impression upon the spectators and instructors because of Hester's foul playing.

"That girl spoils everything she gets into," declared Jess Morse, to Laura and Nellie. "I don't see why Mrs. Case lets her play on the team. We certainly have got a black-eye here."

"I'm sorry for Hester—she has such a temper," sighed the doctor's gentle daughter.

"I do not know whether I am sorry for her or not," said Laura, sternly. "It will be a long time before these girls over here at the East End of town will forget this game. It is bad enough to be beaten; but to be beaten by a member of our own team is what hurts."

"Is that so, Miss?" exclaimed Hester's harsh voice behind her. "Didn't think I'd overhear you, did you? You look out, Laura Belding, that you don't get beaten in another way. I should think you'd had lesson enough——"

A sudden flush sprang into Laura's face.

"What do you mean by that, Hessie?" she cried. "What lesson do you refer to?"

But Hester merely tossed her head and went on. Laura was thoughtful for the remainder of the way home. She was thinking of the veil she had brought away with her from the haunted house.

CHAPTER XX

THE EIGHT-OARED SHELL

Laura Belding was not of a revengeful nature. She hadn't even Bobby Hargrew's desire to "get even" with an enemy. But the mystery of what had happened to her in the haunted house troubled her mind.

Once Jess had mentioned that she thought she had seen Hester Grimes take an electric car for the city the night of the M. O. R. scare at Robinson's Woods. Laura could not help wondering what Hester had been doing up there.

The auto veil Laura had brought back with her was ecru-colored, and was an expensive one. It was strange that anybody should have left such a thing up there in the old house. Not many girls, at least, could have afforded to purchase such a costly veil and then throw it away.

The Grimeses often hired a car; but then, plenty of girls Laura knew wore automobile veils who had never ridden in a car! It was merely a fashion in apparel. So she kept silent about the

veil—never even mentioned it to her chum, or to her brother, or to Lance Darby—and bided her time.

The basket-ball game had made the remainder of the team very angry with Hester Grimes. Only Lily Pendleton stood by her. Hester declared to everybody who would listen that the "game was fixed" and that the Central High team had no chance of winning.

"I guess that's so," said Bobby Hargrew, who overheard Hester say this. "You fixed it all right. I watched you. You'd queer anything you went into. It's lucky you're not rowing in the eight-oared shell. We'd have less chance of winning the girls' boat race than we have, if you were!"

"Well, Miss, they certainly cannot accuse *you* of harming their chances of winning," snapped Hester Grimes. "You're out of it!"

And that was so! The girls' eight-oared shell was without its little coxswain. Bertha Sleigel could not manipulate the steering apparatus of the long boat as Bobby had. And the boat races—rather an informal affair preceding the midsummer aquatic sports—would come on in a fortnight now.

Bobby Hargrew had been very good in school for some weeks. Even Gee Gee could find no

fault with her behavior. But it was more on Laura's account than for any other reason that the irrepressible held herself in. She did not forget that Laura had interceded with Mr. Sharp for her.

The eight-oared crew was to use a second-hand boat; they owned no boat of their own, but hoped to purchase one, or have one presented to them, before the mid-summer sports on Lake Luna.

Professor Dimp, who coached the boys, having been a famous stroke in his own college, coached the girls as well. He was a very severe disciplinarian; but he had picked the crew for the big shell with judgment and skill.

And to make up a crew is no small matter. As far as physical conformation goes in the choice of a crew for an eight-oared scull, tall girls were preferable to short, well built to thin, and heavy girls to "feather-weights." Saving in the cox, the girls were all chosen for their mature physique and long arms.

And Professor Dimp chose the crew and selected their positions with as much care as he gave to his boys' crew. One cannot take enthusiastic girls hap-hazard and make a winning crew.

First of all the professor chose Celia Prime

for stroke oar. Scores of girls can follow time, or stroke, after practice; but some who make the best rowers could never in this world "set the stroke" for a crew. Celia proved herself to be an accomplished stroke, with first-rate form, great pluck, and not easily confused. She could maintain the same number of equally well rowed strokes, whether rapid, medium, or slow; and she could spurt when necessary without throwing the rest of the crew into disorder.

At Number 7 a well-tried oarsman is needed, too, and the professor selected Laura Belding for that onerous position. Number 7 is supposed to take up the stroke duly and to give finish to the action of the crew. A crew that does not work in perfect unison cannot by any possibility be a winning crew.

As selected by Professor Dimp, the girls' crew was as follows:

Celia Prime, stroke
Laura Belding, No. 7
Dora Lockwood, No. 6
Nellie Agnew, No. 5
Roberta Fish, No. 4
Mary O'Rourke, No. 3
Dorothy Lockwood, No. 2
Jess Morse, bow.

They missed Bobby Hargrew dreadfully; but

the crew practised as frequently as possible, hoping to break Bertha in as coxswain, and get her seat shifted to the best place possible for the balancing of the boat. But Bertha was not like Bobby—and she was pounds heavier!

The eight-oared shell of the girls of Central High would compete with similar boats from both of the other Centerport High Schools and with boats from the Highs of Lumberport and Keyport. The three cities being located upon this beautiful inland lake, the young folks were all more or less familiar with aquatic sports. But never before the establishment of the Girls' Branch Athletic Association had the girls of the several cities competed.

The newspapers of the three towns gave plenty of space to amateur athletics, and the big men of the educational boards had taken up the girls' athletic work with vigor, too. Those interested looked forward to many field days and exhibitions during the ensuing months. But outside of their school work the crew of this particular eight-oared shell had little thought for anything but the approaching race.

The boathouse and landing where the shell was kept was right beside the girls' bathing place and athletic field. Naturally, too, it was near Colonel Richard Swayne's handsome place. As the girls were rowing in one afternoon after practice they

saw the Colonel, with a veiled lady in a wheel-chair, on the bank. They seemed to be watching the girls pulling in so easily; but whether the Colonel approved of them, or not, they did not know.

"And he's got *oodles* of money!" sighed Roberta Fish. "Wish he'd give us some for our athletic field."

"But he won't," said Dora Lockwood. "He says we make too much noise. We disturb his daughter. She can't sleep much, they say, and afternoons we spoil her forty winks."

"It is too bad if we really *do* disturb her with our noise," said Laura, thoughtfully.

"You'll never get any money out of the Colonel, Laura," declared Jess.

"I will!" returned Laura, firmly. "You wait and see. Rome wasn't built in a day."

"Huh! but it wouldn't ever have been built at all if Romulus and Remus hadn't made a commencement," scoffed her chum.

The races were held on Saturday afternoon of that week. There were paddling races, four-oared shell races, and eight-oared shell races. There were many classes of contestants; but interest centered mainly in the events in which the high school boys and girls participated.

The girls' eight-oared shell race was the last number on the program. It was a straight-away

half-mile race—not too long, or too short, for girls of the age taking part in the sport.

The five boats got into position with some skill and they got a better start than in the boys' races. The crowds gathered on shore and on the boats lining the course cheered the girls as they shot away over the bright water.

It was a warm and beautiful day and the water was as calm as a millpond. It was "fast water" indeed!

The crew of Central High were looking their best and "feeling fine." They caught Celia's stroke instantly and, at the swinging pace she set, their boat darted through the water, keeping well up at first with the leading shell.

On so short a course the first few strokes, even, sometimes tell the tale. The Keyport crew took the lead at the start, but both East High and Central High of Centerport were close after the leader. The Central crew, indeed, for some rods were only half a length behind the Keyport shell.

It was a pretty fight, and the voices of the spectators grew in volume as the five shells shot along the course.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FINISH OF THE BOAT RACE

CHETWOOD BELDING and his chum, Lance Darby, were in a motor-boat and that boat kept pace with the racing shells. The boat belonged to Prettyman Sweet; but Purt could not run the craft and depended upon his frineds to run it for him. "Pretty Sweet" couldn't do much of anything, so it seemed, and therefore, as Chet remarked, things were made "pretty soft for him."

The boys in the launch cheered the girls of Central High vociferously. Laura and her comrades rowed like veterans. They "kept their eyes in the boat" and Celia pulled a stroke that was both quick and long. The shell was driving through the water at increasing speed.

But the Keyport boat kept ahead. And she seemed to be gaining on Central High, too, though that gain was very slow. The shell of the East High girls crept up, nearer and nearer, its bow overlapping the stern of the Central High shell.

But of a sudden West High of Centerport, coming up on the other side, fouled East High. Their oars crashed together for an instant. It scarcely cost the East High girls an inch; but the colliding boat fell out of the race and dropped back behind the Lumberport shell.

This latter came up with a rush. East High kept ahead of Lumberport for a few yards, and then fell back. The girls from the upper end of the lake came on with increasing speed. Keyport was struggling to maintain its place in the lead. The Central High girls were dropping back by inches.

It was useless for the latter crew to strain further. Lumberport was passing them. Yet Celia set the pace for a spurt and her comrades did their level best. Bertha, in the stern, however, got excited, and shifted her seat. It made the boat drag heavily, and the Lumberport shell passed them with a rush.

Those last few yards all three of the head crews were under great strain. But each held to its work as truly as had the boys' crews earlier in the day.

The Lumberport boat could not overtake the Keyport; but it came in Number 2. Central High was Number 3, and East High fourth, while West High had fallen out of the race entirely. The three leading boats, however, crossed

the line within lengths of each other—a close and exciting finish.

But the girls of Central High were vastly disappointed. The race should have been theirs, according to the time elapsed from start to finish. Often they had done a straight-away half-mile at better speed when Bobby Hargrew was there. There was something fundamentally wrong with the eight-oared crew.

"We could have won—I know we could!—if Bobby had been in her place," wailed Jess Morse. "See how mean Gee Gee is!"

"See how unfortunate Bobby is," returned her chum.

"See how unfortunate we *all* are," added Mary O'Rourke. "I believe if that little scamp had been in our boat to-day we would have won."

"We'll never win without a better balanced boat—that is sure," said Laura, gravely, as she and Jess hurried through dressing so as to join the boys for a trip to Cavern Island.

"And the mid-summer races coming on!" groaned Jess.

"We'll have to get her back before that time," declared her chum, assertively.

"But suppose she has to leave school for setting that fire in Mr. Sharp's office?"

"She never set it!" exclaimed Laura, quickly.

"Who did, then?"

"That is what we must find out," announced Laura, decidedly.

"How ridiculous you talk!" exclaimed Jess. "We can't find out."

"I believe one can explain almost any mystery if one only puts mind enough to it."

"That's all right, Miss Sherlock Holmes. Put your great mind to it. Be the greatest female detective of the age!" scoffed Jess. "You're going to do wonders, aren't you? How about getting a big present from Colonel Swayne for our new athletic field, too? Say! you've been promising a whole lot that you'll never perform, Laura."

"I've been promising to *try,* my dear. And I can still try," laughed her friend.

But Laura was very much in earnest regarding three things just at this time. First, was the discovery of how the fire started in the schoolhouse; second was the mystery of the person who had bound her in the haunted house in Robinson's Woods; third was the interesting of the wealthy Colonel Swayne in girls' athletics.

This last would seem to be the hardest of all, for Colonel Swayne had, on several occasions of late, complained to the school board that the athletic field and bathing place adjoining his estate was a nuisance. He complained of the shrill voices of the girls at play; but how did he ex-

pect young folk to disport themselves and have a good time without shouting and laughter?

The week following the boat race two eagerly contested doubles were going on the courts next to Colonel Swayne's line at the same time. The girls *were* making a great deal of noise, but they were doing so innocently. Once a serving man had climbed a stepladder and, looking over the hedge and fence, announced that his master "would be pleased if the young ladies went to the further side of the field to play."

"How ridiculous!" exclaimed Jess Morse, who happened to be one of the contestants. "Does he think that we can pick up the courts and move them about at will?"

So the girls went on enjoying themselves, and, it must be confessed, did little to lower their voices. Laura had dressed and was coming to the gate when she heard angry voices there. The keeper was saying:

"Very sorry, sir; you cannot come in without a ticket. This is not visiting day."

"I'll show you whether I can come in or not!" roared the voice of Colonel Swayne. "Think I'm going to brow-beaten by a lot of little snips that had better be at home in their nurseries? Their parents ought to be ashamed of themselves for bringing them up so badly. And as for this idiotic school board of Centerport——"

His voice died away as Laura came modestly out of the gate. The old gentleman, choleric as he was, could not face the young girl's cool bow and still bully the gate keeper.

"I—I——" he stammered. Then his eye lit up with recognition. "I say!" he growled. "You're the girl who saved that man on the steeple."

"Yes, sir," returned Laura, demurely. "I am Laura Belding, Colonel."

"Look here! Can't those girls in there keep better order? They sound like a pack of wild Indians. I never heard such yelling."

"Oh, Colonel! we are only having a little fun, mixed with physical culture, after school hours," said Laura.

"Call it fun?" gasped the Colonel. "Sounds more like a massacre!"

"I wish you could come in and see how the girls enjoy themselves, sir," said Laura. "But visitors are not allowed save on invitation. But I will ask Mr. Sharp to send you tickets——"

"I don't want to see 'em!" exclaimed the old gentleman. "Think I'm hanging around here to see a parcel of girls be as unladylike as they can? Let me tell you when *I* was young, girls didn't have athletics—and yell like Indians while they were at it!"

"But don't you think the girls to-day are a

lot nicer than the girls used to be?" asked Laura, demurely.

"No, I don't, Miss!" But the Colonel had to smile a little now. Laura was so unruffled and smiling herself that he could not wholly maintain his "grouch." Besides, he had admired the girl immensely ever since she had shown she had so good a headpiece.

"Why, even my mother says that we girls are much better physically than the girls of her day. We work much harder in school, but we do not get nervous and 'all played out,' as the saying is. She believes it is due to our physical exercises and our outdoor lives. The games and exercises we have in this athletic field are making us stronger and abler to meet the difficulties of life. Don't you believe so, sir?"

"I must confess I had never given it much thought," admitted the old gentleman, eyeing her curiously.

"Don't you see how much healthier and stronger we are than even the girls were ten years ago?" she persisted.

"I never gave much attention to girls—only to one girl," he replied, with a drop in his voice and a gloomy brow.

"You mean your daughter—Mrs. Kerrick?"

"Poor Mabel!" the old man sighed. "Yes. She never was given to activities of any kind—

save social activities. She has never been well."

"But suppose she had 'gone in' moderately for athletics when she was my age?" suggested Laura.

"There were no such things in either the private or public schools at that time, my dear," said the old gentleman, shaking his head. "They had what they called 'calisthenic drills'; but I guess they did not pay much attention to them, after all. Poor Mabel was always nervous—little things annoyed her so dreadfully. And that is why the screeching of those girls annoys her now," added Colonel Swayne, with a quickening note of anger in his voice. "And it's got to be stopped."

"Oh, please don't say that, Colonel!" begged Laura. "I—I hoped you would be interested in our work in time, and help us. We need so many things, you know!"

"Want my help, do you?" demanded the old gentleman, grimly. "And my daughter not able to sleep for weeks!"

"But, Colonel! we are not on the field at night."

"And she doesn't sleep at all at night. Why, she hasn't had a night's sleep in weeks upon weeks. But sometimes she is able to just lose herself in the afternoon. I allow nobody to come to the house, and the servants move about

within doors in felt slippers. I do everything not to disturb her—and here you crazy young-ones are raising particular Sam Hill out there in that open lot!"

Under other circumstances Laura would have been tempted to laugh at the old gentleman's heat. But she knew that he felt for his daughter very deeply—although Laura believed, with the other neighbors, that if Mrs. Kerrick would rouse herself, she could shake off much of her nervous disorder.

"Hasn't she been attended by Dr. Agnew?" asked Laura patiently.

"Oh, the Doc doesn't seem to realize how sick she is," grunted Colonel Swayne. "He does not give her enough of his attention. I feel sometimes that she ought to have some younger and more up-to-date practitioner attend her. Agnew thinks she makes her case out worse than it is."

"But if she cannot sleep——"

"And that's another thing. He will not give her anything to make her sleep. Says her heart is too weak to stand it. But the truth is, Doc does not believe in giving drugs much. You know how he is," said the Colonel, finding himself—to his secret surprise—talking to this young girl as though she were grown up!

"But isn't it because she sleeps in the daytime

that she cannot sleep at night?" asked Laura, thoughtfully.

"Great heavens! she can't sleep in the daytime with you girls yelling like fiends right next door," cried the Colonel, going back to the subject of his exasperation.

"Now, Colonel! we don't yell like fiends," declared Laura, in a little heat herself. "You know we don't. And we are only there after half past three and until half past five—and sometimes from seven o'clock until dark. And so far the athletic field has been open but four afternoons a week."

"By Jove, though! You make yourselves a nuisance when you *are* there," declared the Colonel.

"We don't mean to, I can assure you. And if your daughter cannot sleep save during the hours when we can go to the field, I believe the girls would all be willing to make concessions of their time. You surely mean that Mrs. Kerrick is suffering from insomnia?"

"I should say she was," sighed the Colonel. "The last time we had a thunder-storm was—when?"

"Why, we have scarcely any this season. You know for weeks not a drop of rain has fallen. Our lawn is suffering."

"Mine, too," grunted the Colonel. "But that

isn't the point. The last night's sleep she had was when we had that thunderstorm. The doctor told us she would sleep better if she removed her bed to the top floor so that she could hear the patter of rain on the roof. She has a big room at the back of the house and not only is the roof right over her head, but the tin roof of the extension is right under her windows. But, since she moved up there, there hasn't been a shower, either day of night! And no prospect of one, so the papers say—what's the matter with you?"

For Laura showed that she was startled and she looked up into his face very earnestly. "Oh, Colonel Swayne!" she murmured.

"What's the matter now?" he demanded.

"Do you really believe she could sleep naturally again if there were thunderstorms at night? Do you really believe it?"

"Why—yes. I know it to be a fact, Miss Laura. And so does the doctor. With my daughter it is a proven fact. Even when she was a girl she could always sleep calmly if the rain pattered on the roof. There's nothing more soothing for the nervous patient."

"Then, Colonel, I've got an idea!" gasped Laura.

"I hope it is as good an idea as that one you had the day the man got caught on St. Cecelia's steeple," laughed the Colonel.

"It is as good a one," declared Laura, very earnestly.

"Do you mean something about Mrs. Kerrick?" he asked, more eagerly.

"Yes, sir. Something to help her sleep."

"Have you got influence enough with the weather bureau to bring a storm when none is forecast?" he asked, rather whimsically.

"It will amount to the same, sir. I want to try. May I?"

"I don't know what you mean, Miss Laura."

"I know you don't; but if you'll just be patient and wait until this evening—after supper—I'll show you. Let my brother and me and—yes!—one of his chums, come over to your house. We three will be enough. What time does Mrs. Kerrick retire?"

"Why, she usually goes to bed early."

"Then tell her nothing about our coming. *Can* we come, Colonel?"

"Why—why—surely! But I don't understand."

"You will, sir, when we arrive. I'll tell you all about it then. We'll be there about dark," promised Laura, and she darted away through a side street, running hard, she was so much in earnest and had so much to do in preparation for the performance she had in mind.

CHAPTER XXII

STAGING A THUNDERSTORM

SOMEWHERE Laura Belding had read of this very thing!

But the idea that Dr. Agnew approved of Mrs. Kerrick sleeping where she could hear the patter of rain drops gave incentive to Laura's thought and set her about following out the idea that had first flashed across her mind.

She found Chet and Lance hard at work cleaning the automobile. That was as much fun for them as it would have been for Laura and Jess to go to a party. Laura took her brother and Lance into her confidence instantly.

At first Chet was inclined to pooh-pooh the idea; but Lance, loyal to Laura, fell in with her plan instantly. And by and by Chet came around and said he would aid his sister in carrying through what he termed "a crazy idea."

They had to take Mr. and Mrs. Belding into their confidence at the supper table, for they had to get permission to use the car that evening.

Mrs. Belding was somewhat doubtful of Laura's scheme, and called it "an escapade." But her father was always an easy captive to his oldest daughter's whimsies, and he cheered her idea enthusiastically.

"And besides," said Chet, slily, "Laura is trying to rope in the old Colonel and make him cough up for the girls' athletic field. I know her!"

"Chetwood!" ejaculated his mother. "Is it proper to speak of your sister as a 'roper in'—as though she were a female cowboy? And why should the Colonel contract a bronchial affection for the sake of the girls' athletics?"

The family assembled had to laugh at this; but Chet was somewhat abashed, too.

"Don't be so hard on a fellow, Mother," he begged. "I can't remember to shift languages when I come into your presence—it is just impossible. To talk Americanese outside the house and stilted English within—well, it's just impossible. I'm sure to get my wires crossed—there I go again!"

"I really do not see why you send this boy to high school, James," sighed Mrs. Belding. "It seems to be a waste of time. 'Stilted English,' indeed!"

But Mr. Belding was inclined to laugh at her.

And he was very much interested in Laura's plan for helping Mrs. Kerrick get a good night's sleep.

"I think," said the father, "that the principal trouble with Mabel Kerrick—and always has been—is she has never had any real object in life worth living for. If Fred Kerrick had been a different sort of a man while he lived—or if he *had* lived more than three months after they were married—Mabel might have amounted to something."

"But she really is ill, Father," said Laura.

"So she is ill—now. But it is nothing, I believe, that a vital interest in life wouldn't cure. The Colonel has 'babied' her all her life. When she was a girl she could dance all night, and sleep most of the day, and never took any healthful exercise. And now she is one of these nervous women whom every little thing fusses. She leads the old Colonel a pretty dance, I guess."

"Nevertheless, if she cannot sleep she is in a very uncomfortable state," said Mrs. Belding.

"Let Laura try her magic, then," laughed Chet. "Lance and I will help. I'll go down to the opera house and borrow that stuff all right. I know Mr. Pence, and he'll let us have it."

"It seems to be carried by the majority," said his mother. "I will not object. But get

back as early as possible, children. Late hours are becoming prevalent in this family, and it must not continue."

So after supper Lance came over and the three young people went off in the automobile, first stopping at the stage entrance of the opera house on Market Street. It was not quite dark when the car rolled into Colonel Swayne's grounds. The old gentleman was on the lawn waiting for them.

"Now, what sort of a play are you going to act, Miss Belding?" he asked quizzically.

"You'll see," laughed Laura. "Is Mrs. Kerrick up yet?"

"She is just about to retire."

"Then you will have to play a deceitful part, sir," said Laura. "Go and tell her that you think there will be a thunder storm. Put down the shades at her windows so that the lightning will not frighten her."

"You *must* have a better hold on the weather department than anybody else," declared Colonel Swayne, looking up into the perfectly clear sky. "There isn't a sign of a storm."

"That's all right," said Laura. "Is your gardener about?"

"You will find him at the back of the house. I told him you would need him."

"Then we will go right ahead with our plan," said the girl, confidently. "See that Mrs. Kerrick gets to bed with the idea firmly fixed in her mind that a shower is approaching. That will help a whole lot."

The car was run around to the rear of the big house. There the two boys and Laura found the gardener, with a long ladder and the garden hose already attached to one of the lawn hydrants. They raised the ladder quietly to the roof of the ell, and when the light in Mrs. Kerrick's windows was dimmed by the shades, the boys and Laura climbed up the ladder, dragging the hose and carrying some paraphernalia with them.

Chet put on a pair of rubber gloves and disconnected the telephone wire which here was fastened to the side of the house. Chet knew a good deal about electricity and was careful about putting the telephone out of commission.

Meanwhile Lance began to work the sheet-iron "thunder machine" which they had borrowed from the manager of the opera house.

"Bring the thunder on gradually, Lance," whispered Laura, with a low laugh. "Not too often. Chet has to rig his lightning machine. There!"

Chet had rigged his little box-like instrument

quickly. He brought the two ends of the charged wire into close contact and there was a startling flash.

"Now the thunder—louder!" exclaimed Laura, in a whisper.

The thunder rolled convincingly. It sounded nearer and nearer. After every flash of the stage lightning the explosion of sound became more furious. Then Laura waved her hand to the gardener below. The man turned on the water.

Laura turned the spray-nozzle of the hose-pipe upon the tin roof and against the side of the house. The water began pattering gently. Another flash of lightning, and the thunder rolled as though the tempest had really burst over the house.

It really was a convincing exhibition of stage mechanism. Colonel Swayne climbed the ladder himself and stepped upon the roof.

"This is great," he whispered. "I never saw a girl like this one. She's as full of novel ideas as an egg is of meat. Great!" he added as Chet flashed the lightning again and Lance followed it up with a roar of thunder that shook the house.

Laura gave the "rain storm" more force and the drops pattered harder and harder upon the

roof and against the windows. Soon a very convincing shower was dashing against the panes, while the lightning became intermittent, and the thunder rolled away "into the distance."

But the gardener came up and relieved Laura at the hosepipe, and they finally left the man alone on the roof to continue the shower for some time longer while the young folks removed their paraphernalia, and Chet connected up the telephone wires again.

When they were on the ground Colonel Swayne came back from a trip to his daughter's room. Her maid reported to him that her mistress was fast asleep. The old fellow was really quite worked up over the affair.

"You young people have done me an inestimable service," he declared, shaking hands with them all around. But he clung to Laura's hand a little longer, and added: "As for you, young lady, you certainly are a wonderfully smart girl! Perhaps it pays to make our girls more vigorous physically—it seems to stimulate their mentality as well.

"I haven't really thought much about your athletics; but the school board has been at me, and I shall consider seriously their request that I become one of a number of patrons who will give a foundation fund for a really up-to-the-

minute athletic field for your Girls' Branch. We will see."

"Oh, that will be just scrumptious!" gasped Laura. "If you only knew how much good the sports did us—and how we all enjoy them!"

"I can believe it," agreed the old gentleman, as Lance helped Laura into the car and Chet started the engine. "And I shall give it serious thought. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE UNVEILING OF HESTER

"THERE was a girl in Central High
And she was wondrous wise,
When she wasn't rigging thunderstorms
She was making strawberry pies!

"Gee, Laura! those tarts smell delicious! Do give a feller one?"

Black Jinny, the Belding's cook, chuckled inordinately—as she always did whenever Bobby Hargrew showed her face at the Belding's kitchen window, and shuffled two of the still warm dainties onto a plate and passed them with a fork to the visitor.

"Now, Jimmy, you'll spoil the count. And Bobby's getting in in advance of the other girls. These are for my party to-morrow afternoon," complained Laura, but with a smile for the smaller girl.

"Party! Yum, yum!" said Bobby, with her mouth full. "I just love parties, Laura. 'Spe-

cially your kind. You always have something good to eat."

"But you'll eat your share of the tarts now."

"I am no South American or Cuban. There is no 'manana.' To-morrow never comes. 'Make hay while the sun shines.' 'Never put off until to-morrow,' and so forth. Oh, I'm full of old saws."

"I'm glad," said Laura. "Then there will not be so much of you to fill up with goodies."

"But it's my mind that's full of saws—not my 'tummy.'"

"Same thing, I believe, in your case," declared Laura, laughing. "Jinny says the way to the boys' hearts is through their stomachs; and I think your mind has a very close connection with your digestive apparatus."

"I believe it. They tell me that eating fish is good for the brain, so all brains must be in close juxtaposition to people's stomachs."

"Wha's dat 'juxypotation,' chile?" demanded Jinny, rolling her eyes. "I never heerd the like of sech big wo'ds as you young ladies talks. *Is* dere seech a wo'd as juxypotation?'"

"There is not, Jinny," chuckled Laura. "She's fooling you."

"I knowed she was," said the cook, showing all her white teeth in the broadest kind of a smile. "I be'lieb de men wot makes dictionaries oughtn't

to put in 'em no wo'ds longer dan two syllabubs."

"Great!" crowed Bobby, and then choked over a mouthful of Laura's flaky pie crust.

"Come out on the side porch," said Laura, her face quite flushed. "I've baked my complexion as well as the pies."

"Your cheeks are as red as Lily Pendleton's were last Tuesday at school. Did you hear what Gee Gee did to her?" asked Bobby.

"No."

"Real mean of Gee Gee," chuckled Bobby, as the girls took comfortable seats. "But Lily deserved it."

"Tell me—Gossip!" said Laura.

Bobby merely made a grimace at her and finished the last crumb of pie.

"It was chemistry class. We had done simple tricks and Gee Gee had explained the 'wheres and whereofs' in her most lucid manner. Lily had laid it on pretty thick that day."

"Laid what on?" demanded Laura.

"What she puts on her cheeks sometimes. You know, it isn't a rush of blood to her head that gives her that delicate cerise flush once in a while. I think she tries to emulate Hester Grimes's cabbage-rose cheeks. However, Gee Gee came close enough to her to behold the 'painted Lily's' cheeks. Wow! Gee was mad!" exclaimed the irrepressible. "You know she's

as near-sighted as she can be—glasses and all. But this time she spotted Lily.

"She comes up carefully behind her, with a clean damp sponge in her hand.

"'Young ladies,' says she, 'we will have one other experiment before excusing you to your next class. Notice that!' and she gave one dab of the sponge to Lily's right cheek. You never saw a girl change color so suddenly!" giggled Bobby. "And only on one side!"

"'Don't you come into *my* class, Miss, without washing your face, another time!" exclaims Gee Gee. And you can bet she meant it. And Lily carefully removed all the 'penny blush' before she went back to recitation again."

"Foolish girl," said Laura, softly.

"Nothing but a miracle will ever give that girl a natural blush," declared Bobby, reflectively. "You might work it on her, Laura."

"How do you mean?"

"Aren't you a miracle worker?" laughed Bobby.

"I guess not."

"I hear you are. Colonel Swayne's telling all over town what a head you have got! You certainly have got him going, Laura——"

"Sh! You talk worse slang than Chet. Don't let mother hear you."

"I learned part of it from Chet," declared

Bobby, unblushingly. "But that was certainly a great scheme about the stage thunderstorm. Some folks laughed and said it was all nonsense. But Nellie's father says it was all right. And the Colonel has worked it himself once since, and Mrs. Kerrick has got the habit of sleeping at night now, instead of trying to do so in the afternoon, as she used."

"Well, she's not complaining about us girls making a noise in the field—that's one good thing," said Laura, with a sigh of genuine satisfaction.

"Lucky she is not. Think of the racket there will be there next Friday afternoon. But, oh! I can only be there as a spectator," groaned Bobby.

"Bobby, dear," said Laura. "I wish I really was a magician—or something like that. A prophetess would do, I guess—a seeress. Then I could explain the mystery of the fire in Mr. Sharp's office and your troubles—for the time being, at least—would be over."

"There's the hateful cat that made me all the trouble!" exclaimed Bobby, suddenly, shaking her clenched fist.

Laura peered around the vines which screened the porch and saw Hester Grimes climbing into an automobile, which was standing before the gate of the butcher's premises.

"She *did* testify against you," sighed Laura. "But there really was a fire."

"Just the same, if Hester hadn't said she saw me throw something into the basket, Gee Gee would never have put it up to the principal so strong."

Hester was evidently waiting for her mother to appear from the house. They were probably going shopping. Before Laura spoke again she and Bobby heard—as did everybody else who might be listening on the block—Mrs. Grimes shouting to Hester from an upper window:

"Hes! have you seen my veil?"

"No, Ma," replied Miss Grimes.

"My ecru veil—you know, the big one—the automobile veil?"

"I haven't got it, Ma," shouted back Hester.

Laura leaped to her feet.

"What's the matter, Laura?" demanded Bobby.

"Wait a minute, Bobby," whispered the older girl.

"Where are you going?"

"I've got an errand to do," said Laura, evasively, and darted into the house.

She ran up to her room, seized something from a bureau drawer, stuffed it behind the bib of her big apron, and ran down the front stairway and out of the house by that door.

The Grimes's car was still waiting. Mrs. Grimes—a much overdressed woman with the same natural bloom on her coarse face that Hester possessed—was just coming out of the house.

Laura darted down the walk out at the gate. She flew up the street and reached the automobile before Mrs. Grimes had stepped in. That lady was saying to her daughter:

"Hester! I 'most know you took that veil and lost it. You took it the night you went car-riding alone. You remember? When you said you had been as far as Robinson's picnic grounds——"

"Oh, Mrs. Grimes!" gasped Laura, "is this your veil?"

She flashed before the eyes of Hester and her mother the veil that had been used to gag her when she was overcome by the "ghost" in the haunted house in Robinson's Woods.

"No! That isn't her veil," declared Hester, quickly, but growing redder in the face than Nature, even, had intended her to be. "She never saw that veil before."

"Why, hold on, child!" exclaimed Mrs. Grimes. "That looks like mine."

"No, it isn't!" snapped her daughter.

"Yes it is, Hes," said Mrs. Grimes, and she took the proffered veil from Laura's hand.

"'Taint, either, Ma!" cried Hester.

"I hope I know my own veil, Hessie Grimes. This is it. Where did you find it, Laura?" asked the butcher's wife.

"I found it where Hester left it," said Laura, quietly, and looking straight into the other girl's face. "It was the night the M. O. R.'s went to Robinson's Woods."

"There! what did I tell you, Hes?" exclaimed the unsuspecting lady. "I knew you lost it that night. I'm a thousand times obliged, Laura. I don't suppose you would have known it was mine if you hadn't heard me hollering about it?" and she laughed, comfortably. "I *do* shout, that's a fact. But Laws! it got me back my veil this time, didn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Laura, unsmilingly. "And Hester! Monday morning Miss Carrington will want to speak to you before school."

She turned back without any further explanation to the culprit. She knew that she could make this unveiling of Hester's meanness do Bobby Hargrew a good turn. Hester must admit to Miss Carrington that she had told a falsehood when she said she saw Bobby throw something in the principal's waste-basket. If Hester would not make this reparation Laura was determined to make public what Hester had done to her in the haunted house.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIRST FIELD DAY

THE girls of Central High had looked forward to this open-air exhibition of dancing and field athletics with great expectations. The pretty folk dances were enjoyed by the girl pupils of Central High in assembly. All of the girls who were physically able were expected to take part in such exercises, and Mrs. Case had trained her classes, separately and together, in several of the Morris dances, in the Maypole dance of England, and in the Italian Tarantella.

Besides these general dances there was a special class that danced the Hungarian Czardas and the Swedish Rheinlander as exhibition dances. The gymnasium dresses of the girls of Central High were a dark blue with white braid. In the special dances the class going through the exercises changed costumes in the bath houses and appeared in Hungarian and Swedish peasant costumes.

With these general exercises at this first field

day of the school were also relay races—a simple relay, shuttle relay and potato relay. Following which the champion basket-ball team of the school would play a scrub team, although the field was not a really first class place for a basket-ball court.

For a finale the girls were to repeat the May-pole dance and then break up into running and skipping groups over the greensward of the field, the groups as a whole forming a picture pleasing and inspiring to the eyes of the spectators, who could view the proceedings from the grandstand that had been built along one side of the field.

Sprightly little Bobby Hargrew was a beautiful dancer, and enjoyed the exercise more than she did anything else in athletics. She had been one of Mrs. Case's prize dancers before the unfortunate occurrence that had cut her out of the after-hour fun.

Of course, she took the exercises the physical instructor put into the regular work of the classes; but, forbidden by Mr. Sharp, she could not hope to take part in any of the events on the field. She would be obliged to sit in the stand and look on.

And this deprivation hurt the girl's pride. She hated, too, to have it said that of all the girls of Central High, she was the one singled out for

such punishment. It seemed hard, too, when she knew she was not guilty of the offense of which she stood accused.

However, she needed nobody to point out to her that her own thoughtlessness and love of joking had brought the thing about. Had she not deliberately set out to annoy Miss Carrington, her teacher, by appearing to smoke a cigarette, the Chinese punk would never have been in Mr. Sharp's office. Then they could not have accused her of setting the fire.

It seemed to the fun-loving girl, however, that the punishment did not "fit the crime." The punishment was so hard to bear! She began this last week before the Field Day in a very despondent mood, for her—for Clara Hargrew was not wont to despond over anything.

To her surprise, on Tuesday morning, however, she was called to Miss Carrington's office. The teacher looked very seriously through her thick spectacles at the girl, and her face was a little flushed, Bobby thought.

"Miss Hargrew," said Gee Gee, "you have proved to my satisfaction during the last few weeks that you can behave yourself almost as well as any other pupil in our school—if you so wish. Ahem!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Bobby, demurely.

"And if you can behave so well for these weeks, why not all the time?"

"I don't know, ma'am," admitted Bobby.

"Can't you?"

"Sometimes I fear I shall burst, Miss Carrington," said the girl, bluntly.

"Well! you have improved," admitted the teacher. "But you are not willing to say anything further about the fire?"

"I didn't set it," said Bobby, doggedly.

"And you did not go near that waste basket?"

"I did not."

"Well! it is perfectly ridiculous. The fire could have been set in no other way. There was not a soul in the room but yourself. And the punk was afire when we all left you. That is so; is it not?"

"Yes, ma'am," admitted the girl, with a flash in her eye. "But I want to repeat to you that Hester Grimes never saw me throw that match into the basket——"

"Wait!" observed Miss Carrington, holding up her hand reprovingly. "Do not say anything you would be sorry for about Hester."

"I guess anything I'd say about her I'd not be sorry for," declared Bobby, bluntly.

"But you would. Hester has done a very brave thing. And she has helped you in—er—

Mr. Sharp's estimation and—and in my own."

"What's that?" demanded the amazed Bobby.

"She has come to me and confessed that—out of pique—she made a mis-statement," said Miss Carrington, gravely. "She admits that she did *not* see you put anything in the basket. She said it because she was angry with you——"

"Well! I declare!" burst forth Bobby. "Who ever knew Hessie to do a thing like that before?"

"Why, Miss Hargrew, you seem to be ungrateful!" cried the teacher. "And you do not appreciate what a sacrifice your school friend has made for you. Her conscience would not let her remain silent longer. She had to tell me. She came to me yesterday morning——"

"All her lonesome—by herself, I mean?" demanded Bobby.

"Certainly."

"And nobody made her tell the truth?"

"Her conscience only."

Bobby had been thinking hard, however. She was amazed at this outcome of the matter, but she was not so glad that she could not see some reason for the change of heart on the part of Hester Grimes. "I bet a cent," thought Bobby, to herself, "that Laura had something to do with it. She ran out and spoke to Hessie and her

mother Saturday. She *had* something on Hessie, and made her do this."

But the girl saw it would not be wise to indicate her suspicions to Gee Gee. Besides, Laura evidently wished to keep the matter a secret.

"Of course, Clara," said the teacher, stiffly, "this does not reinstate you in the school. It merely gives you a further chance. We have nothing but circumstantial evidence against you. The fire must be explained, however, before Mr. Sharp can pass upon your name as a member of the junior class for next year."

"Oh, dear, Miss Carrington!" cried Bobby. "He won't suspend me?"

"He will have no choice," said the teacher, rather hardly. "It will be expulsion. You may take your place in the field exercises on Friday and, later, you will have your part in the graduation exercises of your class. He will make that concession. But unless the matter of that fire is cleared up, you cannot return to Central High next fall."

The decision gave poor Bobby little comfort. To be denied the privilege of the high school—which Mr. Sharp would have a perfect right to do considering the seriousness of the offense supposed to have been committed by the grocer's daughter—was an awful thing, to Bobby's mind.

Perhaps her father would have to send her away to private school. All the fun of Central High would be denied her. Worse still, she must go to a strange school with the stigma of having been expelled from her local school. Bobby did something that she seldom did—she cried herself to sleep that night.

She could not help taking Laura into her confidence, and telling her all about it. Laura saw that Hester Grimes had taken the opportunity of putting her fault in the best light possible before Miss Carrington. Indeed, Hester's conduct really seemed to redound to her own credit in that teacher's opinion.

But Laura was not one to go back on her word. She had assured Hester that if she told the truth about Bobby's affair, she, Laura, would remain forever silent about the mystery of the haunted house. And Laura would keep faith.

She saw, however, that Mr. Sharp had conceded all he possibly could to the girl under suspicion. Bobby might take part in the Field Day exercises; but when the term was ended she would cease to be a member of the school and therefore could not take part in any of the further athletics of the girls of Central High.

"It's a hard case, Bobby," was all she could say to the troubled girl. "Let us hope some-

thing may turn up to explain the mystery of that fire."

"You try and turn it up, then, Laura," begged Bobby. "I know you can find out about it, if you put your mind to it. Do, *do,* DO!"

And Laura promised. But she had no idea what she could do, nor how she should go about hunting down the clue which might lead to the explanation of that most mysterious blaze.

The eventful Friday came, however, and Laura had made no progress in poor Bobby's trouble. It was a beautiful day, and the Central High girls marched to the athletic field right after the noon recess. They carried a banner, and were cheered along the short march by their neighbors and friends.

So many people wished to get into the field to see the games that the school authorities had to be careful about the distribution of the tickets. But Laura noted that Colonel Swayne had a prominent seat in the grandstand. She smiled as she saw the old gentleman, and she hoped with all her heart that what the wealthy man saw of the athletics of the Girls' Branch that day would open the "way to his pocket-book," as Jess Morse had expressed it.

CHAPTER XXV

"MOTHER-WIT"

WHETHER Colonel Richard Swayne was an enthusiastic and interested spectator of the sports Laura Belding did not know at the time. She was too busy on the field herself.

She and her closest friends were in the relay races; and of course she played in the basket-ball game. This time Hester Grimes managed to behave herself. She was playing under the eyes of the instructors, her own parents, and the parents of her schoolmates, and she restrained her temper.

Besides, since Laura had caught her in the matter of the veil, and she had been obliged to acknowledge that she had told a falsehood about Bobby Hargrew, Miss Grimes was much subdued.

"Really, she acts like a tame cat. What do you suppose has happened to Hester?" demanded Laura's chum, Jess Morse, in the dressing room.

But Laura kept her own counsel.

The basket-ball game went off splendidly. So did most of the exercises. The dancing, that was interspersed between the games, pleased the parents immensely. And the final number—the dance around the Maypole erected in the middle of the green—was as pretty an outdoor picture as one could imagine, despite the fact that the girls wore dark gymnasium suits.

At the end, the running and skipping on the grass delighted the parents. To see these girls, so merry and untrammeled, with the natural grace of healthy bodies displayed in their movements, was charming. At the end of the afternoon Laura saw Colonel Swayne in close consultation with Mr. Sharp and members of the Board of Education. But the girl heard no particulars of that conference until she went to school the following Monday morning.

Just before noon she chanced to have an errand in the principal's office. Mr. Sharp looked up at the young girl as she entered, nodded to her, and said, with a smile:

"And how does Central High's fairy-godmother do to-day?"

Laura looked astonished, but she smiled. "Do you mean me, Mr. Sharp?"

"Who else would I mean?" he asked, chuckling. "Haven't you heard the news?"

"Not that I was a fairy-godmother," she returned, puzzled.

"Don't you know that in the estimation of a certain gentleman you are the very smartest and wittiest girl who goes to this school? Because you made a thunderstorm for him, and saved a man from falling from a church steeple, he believes that it is athletics for you girls that puts the wit into your heads! But I tell him, in your case, it is 'Mother wit.'"

"You mean Colonel Swayne?" whispered Laura, with sparkling eyes.

"I do, indeed."

"And he has agreed to do something for us?"

"He says he will do a great deal for us," said Mr. Sharp. "He agrees to make Central High a gift of twenty-five thousand dollars for a proper athletic field for you girls, if the Board of Education will find a like amount. And it will be found, I believe. Before many months the girls of Central High will have one of the finest athletic fields in the State."

"Isn't he a dear, good man?" cried Laura, with tears in her eyes. "But it wasn't *I* who did it. It was because he saw us the other day, and saw how happy we were. And—perhaps—because he wants us girls to grow up and be different women from his own daughter."

"Ah! perhaps that last is true, too," said the principal, softly.

The sun shining in at the long window behind the principal almost dazzled Laura, yet as she looked toward him through her tears she saw something that made her dart forward.

"What's the matter?" asked Mr. Sharp.

"Oh! the poor fish!" cried the girl. "That sun is pouring right in upon them."

The four new goldfish in the principal's bowl were swimming around and around madly. Mr. Sharp saw the reason for these activities at once.

"I declare!" he said, with contrition. "I usually remember to pull down the shade."

"Oh! the water is almost hot!" cried Laura, putting her hand in the bowl.

"Let me move that stand," said the principal.

But Laura suddenly held up her hand with such a bright, yet amazed expression on her face, that the principal was startled.

"Please! Please, Mr. Sharp, send for John! Tell him to bring a pail of fresh water and the scoop net. Let him take the fish out of the water here. I have a—a *tremendous* idea."

"What's this? what's this?" demanded the principal, with a puzzled smile. "One of your great ideas, Miss Belding."

"Don't make fun of me, sir," cried the girl,

earnestly. "It is the very greatest idea I ever had. And if it is a true idea, then it is bound to make a certain person the happiest girl in Centerport to-day!"

Mr. Sharp picked up the desk telephone and called the janitor. In five minutes the old man appeared and the struggling fish were scooped out of the water.

"Now, young lady?" demanded the principal.

"Let the bowl of water stand just as it does. See! Look at the 'spot-light' on the floor. Why, the oil in the floor fairly smokes! See! A great burning-glass!"

She swished the wastepaper basket, again almost full of scrap paper, so that the rays of the sun, passing through window pane and water-filled bowl, struck upon the loose papers. In a few minutes a light smoke began to rise from the basket. A bit of the paper turned brown slowly, and then curled up and broke into flame.

"Great Heavens!" gasped the principal. "John, put that out! The girl is a regular little firebug! Is that what you have learned from your dipping into physics and chemistry?"

He ran and pulled down the shade to shut out the sun. Then he turned with both his hands held out to the trembling girl.

"I see! I see!" he cried. "I should have seen it before. 'Mother wit,' indeed! Colonel

Swayne is right. You are an extraordinarily smart girl. That is how the fire started before —and the fish were dead when you emptied the bowl of water upon the burning basket.

"Your young friend is freed of suspicion, Miss Belding. I congratulate her on having such a friend. I congratulate you—— Why, why! my dear child! You are crying?"

"Because I am such a dunce!" gasped Laura, through her tears, and with both hands over her face.

"Such a dunce?" demanded the amazed principal.

"Ye—yes, sir! I should have known what started the fire all the time. I should have seen it at once!"

"Why, pray?"

"Because it was a burning glass that started another fire in Bobby's father's store that very day—and I put it out by shutting out the sun. I should have seen this right then and there, and saved poor Bobby all this trouble. Don't call me smart! I—I'm a regular dunce."

But other people did not think just as Laura did about it. Indeed, the principal's statement that she possessed "Mother wit," went the rounds of the school and the neighborhood, and those who loved Laura Belding—and they were many—began to call her from that time, in gentle

sportiveness, by that nickname—"Mother Wit." And if you wish to read more about Laura Belding, and her friends, and the athletic trials and triumphs of the girls of Central High, they will be found narrated in the second volume of this series, entitled, "The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna; Or, The Crew That Won."

Bobby Hargrew's delight when she was called up publicly before the whole school at Morning Assembly, and Principal Sharp told her that she was freed from any taint of blame in connection with the fire in his office, can scarcely be described. But she knew who to thank particularly for her escape from expulsion, and if one would wish to find a more loyal supporter of Laura Belding than Clara Hargrew, one must search "the hill district" of Centerport well.

And the other girls were glad that Bobby was freed from suspicion, too. Now the crew of the eight-oared shell hoped to make a better showing in the forthcoming water sports. Bobby was active in other athletics. The girls of Central High were out to win all honors, and in the future it was hoped that the standing of the school in the Girls' Branch League would be high indeed.

And with that hope we will leave them.

THE END

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